

OUT OF NOTHING

A NOVEL

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By

Joseph Cardinale

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

Gary Pak, Chairperson

Susan Schultz

Shawna Ryan

John Zuern

Robert Perkinson

ABSTRACT

This is a short philosophical novel centering on the relationship between a father and a son. Spanning a period of about three days, the novel traces the narrator's journey from his home to visit his dying father. Through the dialogical confrontation between three central characters, the novel seeks to dramatize and complicate a complex set of spiritual and metaphysical questions. The novel is preceded by a critical preface that explicates some of its major themes and influences.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|-------------|-----|
| Preface | iv |
| Epigraph | xix |
| Chapter 1 | 1 |
| Chapter 2 | 10 |
| Chapter 3 | 23 |
| Chapter 4 | 34 |
| Chapter 5 | 45 |
| Chapter 6 | 55 |
| Chapter 7 | 63 |
| Chapter 8 | 89 |
| Chapter 9 | 104 |
| Chapter 10 | 122 |
| Works Cited | 145 |

PREFACE

This novel took an absurdly long time to write—much longer than its modest length might suggest. I started writing it almost six years ago. At that point I vaguely knew what kind of novel I wanted to write: A dreamlike allegory focusing on metaphysical and religious themes. I wanted the plot to take the sort of paradoxical form of a journey in which (as in real life) the ultimate destination remains unclear to both the central character and the reader: Not an actively motivated pursuit of a specific goal, but a passively wandering search for something that the narrator cannot name. Most important, I wanted the sentences to cast the kind of musical spell that attracts me to my favorite writers. In short: I set out to write a novel I would want to read. And of course I failed. But I tried my best—and I am still trying.

After numerous false starts I began the initial draft with the following sentence, which survives (in altered form) on the first page of the current draft: “In the beginning of the fall my father invited me to see him at his home at the top of the mountain.” This sentence established the mythic setup I was looking for, setting the plot in motion with a direct call to adventure and explicitly promising a journey toward and confrontation with the father. It also established the thematic trajectory: re-reading the opening sentence, I immediately observed that four of the principal words—Fall, Father, Home, and Mountain—convey both specific and archetypal images. And I liked this effect. A quotation from Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* helped to clarify my original vision for the novel:

The paradox of creation, the coming of the forms of time out of eternity, is the germinal secret of the father. It can never be quite explained....The problem of the hero going to meet the father is to open his soul beyond terror to such a degree that he will be ripe to understand how the sickening and insane tragedies of this vast and ruthless cosmos are completely validated in the majesty of Being. The hero transcends life...and for a

moment rises to a glimpse of the source. He beholds the face of the father, understands—and the two are atoned. (124-5)

I never intended for the novel to closely follow all the traditional steps of the Hero's Journey, but I planned to use this template as a structural foundation for the plot. Though I still had no specific idea where the plot would eventually take me, I instantly conceived of the character of the father (Pop) less as a specific person than as a symbol—a sort of grotesque embodiment of the God-the-Father archetype. I also conceived of the central dramatic conflict, which would, I decided, mirror the conflict between the two major characters in three classic novels: *Moby Dick*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *The Great Gatsby*. The Pop character plays a role similar to that of Ahab, Kurtz, and Gatsby; the Narrator plays a role that recalls Ishmael, Marlowe, and Nick. Each novel is ultimately about the act of interpretation—the struggle to understand a paradoxical figure. In this sense, each novel can be seen as (among many other things) a metaphorical exploration of the human mind confronting the mystery of existence.

Of course, conceiving of the novel in these kinds of grandly inflated and abstract terms was easy; the hard part was actually writing it. And the underlying difficulty for me was finding a *voice* that fit the story I wanted to tell. In pursuit of this voice I re-wrote the first few chapters countless times over a period of several years. In hindsight, I can divide the writing process into three separate phases—each phase marked by a distinct stylistic and syntactical approach.

The problem with the first phase of drafts, composed around 2011-2013, was that I was *over*-writing: the sentences were long and painstakingly crafted, littered with dashes and commas, but also (I began to realize) tediously long-winded and overly digressive. I was basically doing a pale imitation of the essayistic and introspective style perfected by W.G. Sebald in novels like *The Rings of Saturn*, where the “story” takes the form of a kaleidoscopic series of sublimely interconnected digressions. This approach works for Sebald in part because his novels are essentially plot-less (and

because the associative movement of memory is his major subject). It did not work for me because it rendered me incapable of moving the story forward. I kept getting caught in quagmires of backstory and abstraction, spending months writing what amounted to just a few minutes of real time.

I eventually abandoned this approach—and moved to the opposite extreme. In the second phase of drafts, composed circa 2013-2014, I tried to counter my tendency toward overwriting by telling the story (or at least the first part of it) in a deliberately casual and conversational style, as if I were delivering an off-the-cuff spoken monologue to a friend. The goal was to capture the authentic rhythms and patterns of my natural speaking voice. I pursued this voice primarily by a sort of free-writing. I also recorded myself narrating the opening movement of the story aloud (and then transcribed and edited the recording). These techniques generated a lot of new content, the large majority of which was completely disposable; had I continued in this mode, the finished draft would have been at least three times its current length. But the more fundamental and revelatory problem was that the intimately conversational and confessional tone did not seem to fit the character or the dramatic situation: it was simply too direct and too straightforward. For the story to work, I sensed, the narrator needed to appear distant and unknowable to the reader—and I could not achieve this effect if I allowed him to speak directly.

I eventually found an acceptable balance between the two voices. Vestigial traces of the first two phases of drafts remain, but I would estimate that about 95 percent of the actual sentences in the current manuscript were written in the third phase (from early 2015-2017). The breakthrough was, in retrospect, incredibly obvious. In the first two phases I was so focused on mapping the inner landscape of the narrator's mind—his thoughts and memories—that I couldn't seem to advance the story forward. In the third phase I resolved to turn the narrator's attention resolutely toward the *external* world, focusing concretely on action and event. My mantra became: *Let the dialogue drive the story*. A few dives through the digressive consciousness of the narrator were permissible and in fact essential, but I needed to

make sure that (1) each scene centered on the dialogical exchanges between the characters, and (2) each of the narrator's reflections emerged organically from the scene. I would characterize the resulting style as minimalistic and self-effacing. If this narrative style works, then the line between the inner world and the outer world will blur: the external action of the story will begin to seem like a dreamlike reflection of the inner world of the narrator's mind.

Which brings me to the next subject: Influences. In my prospectus, I discussed the aesthetic tradition that I envisioned the finished novel participating in. Specifically, I set out to write a novel that might meaningfully be perceived as "religious" and "spiritual" in its orientations and implications. I defined the operative terms broadly. A properly *spiritual* or *religious* work of fiction (according to my definition) was characterized less by subject matter than by the "epistemological worldview" that shapes it. Citing the fiction of authors such as Borges, Kafka, O'Connor, Beckett, and Dostoyevsky as superlative models, I described this religious-spiritual worldview as one that seeks to dramatize and communicate a kind of "Socratic awareness" of the "mystery of existence." A brief excerpt from the prospectus:

Of course the paradoxical wisdom of the Socratic method was to continually remind us our ignorance. To remind us that we don't know what we think we know. An oft-quoted verse from the *Tao-te Ching* encapsulates this bit of ancient wisdom: "He who thinks he knows, doesn't know. He who knows that he doesn't know, knows. For in this context, to know is not to know. And not to know is to know." How does this quotation relate to my definition of religious-spiritual fiction? Only in the obvious sense: I would argue that the fundamental purpose of religious and spiritual fiction is to guide the attentive reader toward a direct encounter with this eternally startling truth. Far from offering answers or prescribing beliefs, in other words, truly religious or spiritual literature casts the reader deeper into the

abyss of our existence. It makes us aware of the limits of our understanding, which are also the limits of our flesh-and-blood bodies and brains. It places us in the position of Job at the end of *The Book of Job*.

That last reference to *The Book of Job* is perhaps worth unpacking. For me, *Job* is an archetypal example of a religious text that transcends the particulars of its tradition, guiding the reader into a contemplative awareness of *unknowing*—and ending *without* proposing a satisfactory resolution to the mystery of existence.

Consider the plot: A supposedly “good” God terrorizes His most faithful subject, leading the subject to existentially question the purpose of life and the meaning of God’s justice. The bulk of the book dramatizes these existential questions in the form of a poetically Socratic dialogue between Job and his three friends, who argue (unpersuasively) that God is just and Job must have done something to deserve his suffering. Heroically, Job rejects these answers, insisting on hearing directly from God. And at the end of the book Job gets his wish: God speaks to him from Whirlwind. Yet the answer affirmed by God is terrifying, mystifying, and profoundly unsatisfying. A quote from the introduction to Stephen Mitchell’s translation of *Job*:

If God’s answer comes from an objective whirlwind, it answers nothing, and can only be the magnificent, harsh, and notoriously unsatisfactory harangue that most interpreters have found. As rational discourse, it reduces itself to this: *How dare you question the creator of the world? Shut up now, and submit.* After several pages of eloquent browbeating, Job can do nothing but squeak what amounts to, *Yes sir, Boss. Anything you say.....* Compared with the endings of the *Iliad* or the *Commedia* or any of the major works of Shakespeare, this would be a wretched climax: so uneconomical, so anticlimactic indeed, that it seems more like a pratfall than a finale. We need to penetrate more deeply.

(xviii)

Penetrating more deeply, as Mitchell prescribes, requires an attentively dialectical effort from the reader. And this effort—the provocation of it—is perhaps the distinguishing feature of the kind of religious-spiritual literature I want to write. The questions are clarified; the answers are obscured. Yet we sense that the answers we seek are present. In this sense, I might say the religious-spiritual work of literary art speaks *from* the Whirlwind. In doing so it satisfies the Shakespearean ideal of holding the mirror up to Nature. Like Nature, the religious-spiritual text simultaneously invites and resists analytical interpretation, refusing to yield any mystery beyond its own self-evident beauty.

There is a refrain from a Bob Dylan song called “Ballad of a Thin Man” that often crosses my mind when I encounter this kind of religious-spiritual work of art: “Something is happening here and you don’t know what it is.” For me, this lyric encapsulates the ambiguous dialectic that grounds deep aesthetic feeling: the affirmation of faith in an immanent sub-textual meaning (“*something* is happening here”), and the explicit withholding of meaning (“and you don’t know what it is”). For me, this dialectic, apprehended through the prism of art, evokes a curiously exhilarating sense of frustration—a sense that I have been excluded, for reasons unknown, from a knowledge the author either understands or is pretending to understand.

Of course, the religious-spiritual work of fiction succeeds only and exactly to the extent that it evokes the reader’s *desire* to know what is really happening beneath the veil of the written page. And the evocation of this desire is ultimately a product of the storyteller’s commitment to and command of narrative craft. With this understanding in mind, I want to briefly point to three influences that directly shaped the mood and style of my novel. The first two influences are literary—the third is drawn from my life.

The first is Borges, whose short fiction often takes the form of puzzles or riddles, situating the reader as a sort of detective implicitly charged with the task of un-raveling the textual mystery. In the introduction to *The Aleph and Other Stories*,

Andrew Hurley suggests that Borges's stories are designed to draw the reader's attention toward "the motif of knowledge, and specifically a knowledge that is at least potentially trans-figurative....that knowledge which is, like God's, total, or the knowledge that the god would have us know" (xi).

As Hurley points out, this knowledge is essentially mystical. Accordingly, Borges's stories often culminate with evocations of mystical experiences. A representative example (and a personal favorite) is "The Writing of the God," which is narrated from the perspective of an Aztec priest imprisoned in subterranean cell next to a jaguar. Lying in the darkness, the narrator recalls a legend according to which, on the first day of creation, God had written "a magical phrase" that was capable of restoring the divine order: "No one knows where he wrote it, or with what letters, but we do know that it endures, a secret text, and that one of the elect shall read it." The narrator determines that this secret phrase is written on the flesh of the jaguar in the adjacent cell. In an effort to decipher God's redemptive message and escape from his cell, the priest spends years "learning the order and arrangement of the spots on the tiger's skin." This effort culminates in a mystical vision, which Borges describes as follows:

And at that, something occurred which I cannot forget and yet cannot communicate—there occurred union with the deity, union with the universe (I do not know whether there is a difference between those two words). Ecstasy does not use the same symbol twice; one man has seen God in a blinding light, another has perceived Him in a sword or in the circles of a rose. I saw a Wheel of enormous height, which was not before my eyes, or behind them, or to the sides, but everywhere at once. This wheel was made of water, but also of fire, and although I could see its boundaries, it was infinite. It was made of all things that shall be, that are, and that have been, all intertwined....and the mere sight of that Wheel enabled me to understand all things, without end....I saw the universe and saw its secret designs....I

saw the mountains that rose from the water, saw the first men of wood, saw the water jars that turned against the men, saw the dogs that tore at their faces. I saw the faceless god who is behind the gods. I saw the infinite processes that shape a single happiness, and understanding all, I also came to understand the writing on the tiger. (93)

The archetypal narrative trajectory of “The Writing of the God” mirrors that of *The Book of Job*: the protagonist doggedly pursues an absolute answer to the riddle of life—and miraculously finds it! The central irony in *Job* is that although God’s revelation utterly fails to satisfy the reader, it seems to completely satisfy (or at least silence) Job, whose response is to mutely surrender his effort to understand. This surrender can be interpreted as either meek submission or mystical transcendence.

A similarly ambiguous irony complicates the conclusion of Borges’s story. Having divined the secret text written on the tiger, the narrator begins, tantalizingly, to *hint* at its content: “It is a formula of fourteen random (apparently random) words, and all I would have to do to become omnipotent is to speak it aloud.” Yet he declines to speak the secret formula, because, he claims, he is no longer the person that he once was: “He who has glimpsed the universe, who has glimpsed the burning designs of the universe, can have no thought for a man, for man’s trivial joys or calamities, though he himself be that man. He *was* that man, who no longer matters to him” (94). As readers, we are cast into the cloud of unknowing frustration I discussed above: something is happening—and the character seems to know what it is. But the reader is left in the dark.

I point to this passage merely as an example. As a writer I’m less interested in understanding mystical experience than practicing the narrative techniques Borges employs in order to evoke it. The excerpt quoted above, along with similar passage from the conclusion of “The Aleph,” explicitly influenced the final chapter of my novel, which seeks to describe a moment of mystical (or perhaps anti-mystical) transport. More generally, the aesthetic spirit of Borges guided me throughout the

difficult process of composing the novel, serving as a continual reminder of fiction's capacity to unapologetically synthesize storytelling with metaphysical inquiry. Most mainstream literary fiction buries the philosophical questions *beneath* the surface of the action, focusing on the concrete particulars of character, place, emotion, and plot. Show, don't tell, we are taught: "Not ideas about the thing but the thing itself." Yet Borges reverses this dictum. In his fiction, the metaphysical questions often *are* the story's surface—as the (decidedly un-subtle) plot of "The Writing of the God" perhaps exemplifies: Not in things, but in ideas.

The second major influence on my novel was Kafka. Like Borges, Kafka dramatizes philosophical problems and paradoxes. Yet his style is much different—and much more similar to my own natural writing style. Borges's stories take the form of scrupulously calibrated intellectual games, engaging (and ultimately frustrating) the *rational* tendencies of the reader's mind. Kafka's fiction is decidedly messier, and its aesthetic imprint more visceral. His stories engage the *unconscious* mind, unfolding with the prophetic and paradoxical logic of dreams. In a critical essay called "Kafka and His Precursors," Borges cites Zeno's Paradox as an encapsulation of the central epistemological problem dramatized in Kafka's fiction: "A moving object at A...cannot reach point B, because it must first cover half the distance between two points, and before that, half of the half, and before that, half of the half of the half, and so on to infinity; the form of this illustrious problem is, exactly, that of *The Castle*, and the moving object and the arrow and Achilles are the first Kafkaian characters in literature." This description might as easily describe the experience of *reading* Kafka: the knowledge we seek is eternally deferred. There is no promise of mystical release.

Kafka's example has permeated all the fiction I've written since I was a teenager, but the most direct influence on *Out of Nothing* is a story called "The Judgment," which also centers on the relationship between a father and a son. "The Judgment" can be divided into two distinct sections. In the first section we see (through a close 3rd person narration) the protagonist, a successful young merchant named George, sitting at the window overlooking a bridge and composing a letter to

a childhood friend who had moved to Russia several years earlier. Knowing that his friend is struggling personally and professionally, George hesitates to reveal the happy details of his own flourishing life (his thriving business, his recent engagement) and instead fills the letter with genial gossip. Having finished his letter, George goes across the hall to visit his ailing father...and here the mood and meaning of the story dramatically shifts.

George casually tells his father that he has written a letter to his friend in Russia. Inexplicably, his father questions the very existence of the friend (“You have no friend in St. Petersburg”). George seems to interpret this reaction as a symptom of his father’s illness. He helps his father into bed, covers him with blankets and encourages him to rest. At this point the Father suddenly throws off his blankets, springs from his bed, and begins (in a monologue that distantly echoes the Whirlwind speaking to Job) to viciously berate George, telling him that he *does* indeed know his friend in Russia—and he also knows that George has been lying to his friend for years: “He knows it already, you stupid boy, he knows it all! I’ve been writing to him....That’s why he hasn’t been here for years, he knows everything a hundred times better than you do yourself” (35). After accusing his son of selfishness and deceit, the father issues a judgment: “So now you know what else there is in the world besides yourself, till now you’ve known about yourself! An innocent child, yes, that you were, truly, but still more truly have you been a devilish human being. And therefore take note: I sentence you now to death by drowning!” Rather than defending himself, George feels “urged from the room....Out of the front door he rushed, across the roadway, driven toward the water.” He runs to the bridge, swings himself over the railing, holds on just long enough to beg forgiveness from his parents, and then lets go, apparently plunging to his death: “At this moment,” Kafka concludes, “an unending stream of traffic was just going over the bridge.”

Is “The Judgment” a “good” story? I’m not sure. If it were written for present-day creative writing workshop I suspect most readers would have no difficulty finding points to critique and question. Perhaps the most obvious critique is

that the second half of the story—and particularly the climax—does not seem to follow naturally from the first half: George’s suicide feels less tragic than simply disorienting and perplexing, as if two separate fragments from longer narratives have been awkwardly grafted together. (This is ironic because Kafka in fact wrote the story in one late-night sitting.) To borrow a term coined in Eliot’s critique of *Hamlet*, there is no clear *objective correlative* for the story’s dominant emotions: we never quite understand *why* the characters are doing what they are doing. Consequently, “The Judgment” lacks the sense of compact precision and inevitability that we find in more classically wrought narratives. (Compare George’s suicide, for example, with that of Seymour Glass in the final sentence of JD Salinger’s classic “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” which seems shocking in the moment, but completely inevitable in retrospect. Salinger subtly prepares the reader; Kafka does not.) Yet the absence of this kind of aesthetic inevitability is also the source of the story’s strange (estranging) power. “The Judgment” haunts us like a darkly luminous fragment from a dimly remembered dream—one that we sense we might understand if only we could recover the missing pieces.

I wanted to write a novel that would harness some of the mythic and mystifying energy that animates Kafka’s stories and parables. “The Judgment” was a particular template not so much because it happens to involve a father and son, but because it seems to dramatize an emotional and narratological transformation that resonates with my aesthetic sensibilities. The first half is laboriously literal and realistic; the second half is sublimely mythic and surreal. Midway through, we seem to be reading a conventionally realistic story about a father and a son; by the end, we are reading an archetypal story about Father and Son, God and Man, Guilt and Innocence. In this sense the ending of “The Judgment” implicitly *judges* the beginning. One might even interpret the story as a critique of the realist mode of fiction writing, which tends (like George in his letter) to focus on the proverbial trees without quite seeing the forest.

I hope my novel takes a similar trajectory: starting in a vaguely recognizable “real” world and ending in more of mythic-symbolic dreamspace—leaving the reader to wonder if and when a shift from “reality” occurred. Following Kafka’s example I aimed to accomplish this shift without allowing any obviously supernatural or miraculous events to intrude on the concrete plot. As in “The Judgment,” nothing *impossible* happens in my book (with the possible exception of one event in the final pages).

One of the more risky (and perhaps less successful) methods I used in order to create this Kafkaesque dreamlike mood was to eliminate a lot of the backstory from the book. An earlier draft was about 50 pages longer, and during the editing process, besides getting rid of many extraneous words and sentences, I completely excised three long sections. One of these sections described in detail how the narrator had converted to his current religious faith; the second section summarized the history of his relationship with his father (Pop); and the third was a long satiric essayistic chapter that explicated the history of the house in which the second half of the story takes place, linking the property to various real and invented figures from 19th century revivalist movements. For me, the major problem with these sections was that they disrupted the (already rather slow) forward momentum of the narrative. But a related and more significant concern was that the inclusion of all this backstory threatened to diminish the dreamlike mood I aspired to create. In other words, I sensed that the backstory overly *explained* the psychology of the characters, making the story feel more “realistic” and therefore less mythic. I’m confident in the aesthetic logic underlying this decision, but I also worry that it renders certain parts of the book nonsensical.

The first two influences that I have mentioned (Kafka and Borges) are purely literary. The third influence I want to mention—and perhaps the most significant—is drawn from my personal life: It’s the experience of being a father. I should emphasize unequivocally that this experience did *not* shape the novel’s conflict, plot, or central emotions, but rather its style, structure, and diction. The large majority of the current

draft of *Out of Nothing* was written during the period when my son, Giuseppe, was between the ages of two and four. So as I was writing the book, I was also observing my son as he was learning to use language and to delight in storytelling. The impact of this experience is so pervasive that it is difficult to pinpoint, but I want to briefly discuss one point that seems particularly influential.

This point relates to dialogue. Over the past year, I have recorded and written many of the conversations I've had with my son, and I've frequently found myself awed by the stark and Socratic beauty of our exchanges. Here's an example of a recent dialogue that took place in a parked car as Giuseppe (Peppe) looked out the backseat window. Suddenly, he asked me, "What is God?"

J: I don't know. What do you think God is?
G: (*Looking at the house outside the window.*) Maybe God is a house?
J: That's a cool idea. What's inside the house?
G: Um....toys.
J: What else? Are there people in the house?
G: I guess so.
J: Who? What people?
G: Peppe, dad, friends.
J: Hmmm. Why would God be a house?
G: Because some people say God is *everything*.
J: What does the house look like?
G: Um....God.
J: Then what does God look like?
G: Everything.
J: God looks like *everything*?
G: Yeah. (*Pause. With conviction.*) He does.
J: Where did God come from?
G: (*Starting to sound bored.*) I don't know.
J: What's outside the house? If God is the house, then what's outside the house?
G: Everything.
J: Does everything ever end? Does it just go on forever?
G: I guess so.
[*Long pause.*]
J: Well, that's really beautiful, Peppe.
G: Not *that* beautiful.

What interests and influences me here has less to do with the (atypical) philosophical content of the dialogue and more to do with its meditatively staccato rhythm: the way the initial question (what is God?) appears out of (from my perspective) nowhere; the way Peppe seems to tire of the subject midway through—and the deliberate way I try to push him forward through targeted Socratic questions; the terse and open-ended answers, which seem accidentally (and thus naturally and unpretentiously) mystical and poetic (e.g. God looks like “Everything”); the ambiguous pauses, simultaneously deeply thoughtful and deeply complacent; the implicit callbacks to previous conversations (e.g. when he says, "Some people say God is everything," he is quoting something I said months earlier). The intimate back-and-forth rhythm of my dialogue with Giuseppe distantly echoes the koanic rhythms that I find in Samuel Beckett’s plays, particularly *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*: Not two singular characters talking, but two sides of a single mind working their way—tentatively, playfully, a little lazily; without hope, yet without despair—through an unresolvable mystery, and ultimately returning to the same place where they started, only to start again later on, because there is nothing else to be done.

My novel is heavily dialogue driven; each chapter centers on a conversation. I think as you read the dialogues between the narrator and Eliot, and (perhaps less so) between the narrator and Pop, you will hear an echo of the rhythms in the above dialogue. The power dynamic underlying these dialogues is also essentially similar. I might reductively describe this dynamic by saying that when the narrator speaks to Eliot, he is generally occupying a mental space similar to the one I occupied in my dialogue with Giuseppe: he is implicitly speaking *down* to Eliot, seeking to understand and focus (through gently directed questions) an open mind that tends to move in evasively unpredictable directions. In his conversations with Pop, this dynamic is reversed: Pop seems to speak from an epistemological plane that the narrator cannot hope to possibly pin down or understand—and he speaks with a deliberate aggression, as if toying with the narrator. In this sense, he becomes a sort of grotesque parody of the Socratic teacher.

I will also mention (in passing) that a related real-life influence on the novel's dialogue came from listening to conversations between my ninety-nine-year-old Grandfather, who is hard-of-hearing, and his wife. In their exchanges I hear a similarly intimate, musical, and often comedic staccato rhythm, accentuated by my grandfather's tendency to mishear, and punctuated by pauses, distracted requests for clarification, belabored repetitions of previous statements, and apparent non-sequiturs. It occurred to me recently that the use of language, rather than clarifying and connecting human beings, actually erects a kind of barrier between the speaker and the world. Yet this barrier is (or can be) beautiful, and perhaps the writer's responsibility is to invite the reader to apprehend this beauty.

In closing I want to emphasize that I am not particularly proud of this current draft. Writing is always a humbling and Sisyphean process, and I've always found it infinitely easier to abstractedly talk about my aesthetic vision (as I've tried to do above) than to actually execute that vision on the page (as I've tried to do in the novel). In fact, the act of writing this critical preface has only made me more painfully aware of how far I have fallen short of my aesthetic ideals, leaving me to wonder again why I bother writing fiction when so many exponentially better writers have already done exactly what I am trying to do. Regardless, I realize the current draft needs a lot of work to reach its potential—and I'm eager for criticism. Most of all, I feel a tremendous gratitude to you for taking the time to read this draft and to let my words live, at least for a moment, in your mind.

EPIGRAPH

What do I know about God and the purpose of life?

I know that this world exists.

That I am placed in it like my eye in its visual field.

That something about it is problematic, which we call its meaning.

This meaning does not lie in it but outside of it.

That life is the world.

That my will penetrates the world.

That my will is good or evil.

Therefore that good and evil are somehow connected with the meaning of the world.

The meaning of life, i.e. the meaning of the world, we can call God.

And connect with this the comparison of God to a father.

— Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916*

You already know who I am. And I am still the same person. Nothing has changed. Nothing real. Just the words are different. The story is still the same. In the beginning was a flat and lengthening line. In the middle the line went up and down in all different directions. And in the end the line flattened out again. That's where I am now—at the end of the line and flattening out. That's where I always was, even when I was rising and falling and circling back and forth. I just didn't always know it. Now I know it. That's all the difference is. I know where I am now. And now I want to explain how I got here. I have to start somewhere. So I'm starting here. Here is what happened.

In the beginning of the fall I received a letter from Pop inviting me to come see him at his home at the top of the mountain. The letter was written in painstaking black ink on the front and back of a sheet of white paper. A drop of what looked like dried blood was fingerprinted in the margins and stapled to the back was a one-way bus ticket from Babylon to the upstate town where he lived a long drive uphill from the bus station. *I have something I want you to see.* That was how his letter began. And then he explained that he could not tell me in words what the *something* was. I would have to see it to believe it. Besides, I hadn't seen him in years and he was sick.

I didn't intend to go see him. Not at first. And not because I doubted he was telling the truth. I believed him. And I wanted to see what he had to show me. But I knew that it was probably nothing.

So I threw the letter in the trash. And for the next few hours I forgot all about him again. I had a set routine for the hours after work: rest, exercise, shower, dinner, dishes, drink a bottle of wine and watch a game or a movie and then go to bed and fall asleep reading philosophy. That night I was reading Saint Anselm's version of the ontological argument for the existence of God. I read until the words began to blend apart and I found myself falling in and out of sleep and seeing anew the same two

sentences each time I opened my eyes: *If a person could conceive of something better than God, then the creature would rise above its creator and judge its creator. And this is absurd.*

I must have drifted all the way to sleep because the next moment I remember for sure is waking up from a falling dream to the sound of the telephone ringing from the kitchen. Another two rings had had passed before I was all the way out from inside the blankets and making the walk to the phone. I picked up the receiver in the middle of the sixth or seventh ring.

No one answered when I said hello. I said it again. Another nothing. And then as if from a great distance there came the sound of a piano playing the first few notes of *Fur Elise*: da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-dumb. The last chord was pedaled and held on for a few seconds. I said hello. Hello. Hello? I asked if anyone was there. No answer. Just when I decided to hang the phone up and go back to bed I heard a man's voice on the other end of the line saying hello-hello-hello and asking if I was there. His voice sounded like an echo of mine. And so I sensed even from that first moment that I was talking more to another version of myself than to someone else.

"I'm here," I said. "Hello?"

"Can you hear me?"

"Yeah. Who is this?"

"You know who it is."

"No," I said.

"I am what I am," he said.

I said, "What?"

"I am what I am," he said. "Popeye."

"I think you might have the wrong number," I said.

"Popeye," he said. "I'm Popeye the sailor man." Then he sang the same words in the voice of the cartoon character: "I'm Popeye the sailor man." He played a pedaled chord with the last word. It was the wrong chord, but he tried again and got it right the second time.

I told him I was going to hang up. I wasn't though. I still wanted to know who

he was and what he wanted. And he seemed to either know that or not care because he didn't answer except to snort out the first syllable of a laugh. He played another couple of chords, mixing them up and down and in and out of one another until I started to make out the slowed-down melody of the Popeye song from the cartoon. I heard him humming along. He hummed through the first verse, but then he slowed down even more and started singing the second verse—

I yam what I yam
And that's all what I yam
I'm Popeye the sailor man

—in a low and longing voice that sounded nothing like the original. It sounded more like something I might have heard in a church: a moaning and mournful chant. He was blending each word through and out the next and stretching the vowels so far out that each line took about half a minute to get to the end of. I thought it sounded sort of beautiful. That was all the thought I had as I listened to him. But somewhere in the center of that thought—at some point in the spaces between the words *that's all what I yam*—I figured out all at once who he obviously was.

“Hi Pop,” I said.

I heard him breathing. I breathed back and waited for him to go on.

“Did you get my letter?”

“Yes. Thanks.”

“So you're coming to see me!”

“No,” I said. “I don't know.”

“Yes,” he said. “You do know. And this isn't a choice. Do what I say. Leave tomorrow morning. Arrive at 7:00. My driver will pick you up at the station. Eliot. Name's Eliot. He'll have a sign with your stupid name on it. He'll drive you up here. All right?”

“No,” I said.

“Yes,” said Pop, and spread his arms across the piano keyboard: a monstrous

clatter of low black flats. "Listen. I need your help."

"Why?"

"I'm not quite right."

"What's the matter?"

"I'm crazy."

I tried to laugh. "You sound all right," I said.

"No, I'm not. I'm crazy. You ever been crazy?"

"Not that I know of."

"You don't know until you're not," he said. "Listen. I need to tell you something."

"I'm listening."

"Are you sitting down?"

"No."

"Sit down."

"OK," I said, but I didn't sit down.

"Listen," said Pop. A few seconds of silence—and then a thundering shot of sound. "You hear that?"

"Sure, Pop."

"You know what that was?"

"It sounded like a gunshot, Pop."

"Listen. You still watch the movies?"

"Sometimes," I said.

"You remember that Travolta movie we saw that time? Phenomenal?"

"*Phenomenon*."

"Travolta was in it."

"Yeah. It's called *Phenomenon*."

"Right. And he's this regular dude. All right. Then one day he sees a flash of light in the sky. And what happens after that?"

"After he sees the light?"

“What happens to Travolta?”

“He develops superpowers. Right?”

“That’s right. He reads minds and shit. And he starts trying to save the world.

You remember what happens at the end?”

“I think so, Pop.”

“What happens?”

“Doesn’t he die at the end?”

“That’s right. He dies. Of what?”

“I think he has a brain tumor.”

“Good. And then what?”

“And then—he dies.”

“What’s it turn out?”

“Huh?”

“What’s it turn out’s the link between the tumor and the fucking superpowers?”

“Oh. It turns out one was causing the other. Right?”

“Right. Or the other was causing the one,” he said.

“OK,” I said.

“You see where I’m going here?”

“Not yet, no.”

“Use your brain.”

“Just tell me, Pop.”

“Use your *brain*. Get it?”

“No,” I said. “Can’t you just—”

“Listen. Which one of us is Travolta?”

“What do you mean?”

“Me or you? Which one—”

“You are, Pop. You are. You’re the phenomenon.”

“And how the hell you think I got my powers?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “You saw the light?”

“A long time ago. Get it?”

“Oh,” I said.

“Spread out like a hand.”

“You have a brain tumor?”

“Spread out like a fucking *hand* in my head.”

“Oh my God,” I said. “I’m sorry Pop. Are you—”

“Dying,” he said. “Listen.” He fired the gun again. I seemed to hear the sound from outside of the phone and faraway before I heard it from inside the speaker.

“Hey,” he said. “You remember that little gray tomcat used to run around here?”

“The gray one,” I said. “Yeah.”

“You remember him?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s dead.”

“Oh,” I said.

“I just shot him in the face.”

“Jesus Christ,” I said.

“I’m looking at his insides right now.”

“Listen, Pop. Put the gun away.”

“Listen,” he said.

“Put the gun away.”

“Listen to me.”

“I am,” I said.

He fell silent for another few seconds. “You figured it all out?”

“Figured what out?”

“It,” he said.

“No.”

“You believe in God?”

“Yes,” I said. “Sort of.”

“You’re a Jesus freak now?”

“No,” I said, and wanted to explain. But there was no point in explaining.

“You ever read Jonah?” Pop asked.

“Jonah and the whale?”

“You’ve read it?”

“Yeah.”

“He goes inside the whale.”

“For three days,” I said. “I know.”

“Everything’s pitch dark inside. Did you know that?”

“Sure,” I said, though the truth was I had never really thought about it. I had always thought of the Jonah story as a metaphor. And so I had never actually imagined what a person stuck inside an actual whale would actually *see*. But I saw now that Pop was right. It would have been too dark to see anything.

“You know people used to hunt whales?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Do you know why?”

“No. Why?”

“*Light*,” said Pop.

“Hmmm,” I said.

“Back in the day,” he said. “People used to make oil out of the blubber. No shit. And then they’d use the oil to light their lamps. That was what they killed the whales for. Light! Can you believe that?”

“That’s...interesting,” I said.

“You think so?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s all you got? *Interesting?*”

“I don’t know, Pop.”

“You’ve ever been swallowed by a whale?”

“Not that I know of.”

“You’d know.”

“Then no.”

“Hmmm,” he said. “You will be. You *will* be,” he said again, lowering his voice so that he sounded like Yoda saying the same words to Luke in the *Empire Strikes Back*. And then he played another chord. He played it several times—eighth notes—before he switched to another chord and started singing again in his Popeye voice:

All the light in the world
All comes from inside
Inside of a whale
Another world lies

And if lies tell the truth
Then the world is a lie
But if the world is the truth
Then I want to know why

And sometimes I wonder
If the world is a veil
And we’re all stuck inside
Inside of a whale

He repeated the last line over and over. His voice grew softer, fading out and under until I wasn’t sure if he was singing the words or I was thinking them: *inside of a whale inside of a whale inside of a whale*. A cascade of scales and chords—and then the line went dead.

I hung up. I walked back to bed. I turned the light off. I was already dreading the hard work of having to fall back asleep again now that I was all the way awake. To stop from thinking I started running my mind through the steps of Anselm’s proof.

Anselm defined God as a being that embodied all the perfections a person could name. I tried to imagine a perfect being. All I saw was the word that seemed to name it: Perfect. But that was enough. That I could imagine the idea of perfection was enough to lead to the next point. Because if the idea of perfection existed only inside my mind I would also have an idea of something better than it—a perfect being that also existed in the space outside my mind. And that was a contradiction.

I was getting tired. But I never really fell asleep. I dreamt of Pop. I was talking to him on the phone again. Only this time I had called him. I had called him because I wanted something from him. He knew something I didn't know—some truth I needed for some desperate reason. I was going to die if he didn't tell me. I kept asking him: What is it? He kept laughing and saying: If you have to ASK what it is, you're never going to KNOW.

At 7AM the alarm started. I opened my eyes and listened to the alarm beating louder and faster until I stood up from the bed—I must have—and walked across the room to turn it off. I must have taken a shower. I must have brushed my teeth and dressed for another day of work before I went to the kitchen to make breakfast. And after the eggs I must have washed the dishes again and gathered my backpack and walked out the door to the car because that was the routine. That was what I did every morning. I was doing what I always did: Starting the car. Backing out of the driveway—driving to the end of the road. Stopping at the stop sign. Turning left. Left again and then right. Merging onto the expressway. Each act seemed like a separate choice. And in the echo of each choice was the same series of questions: Why? What for? What now?

I knew these questions led nowhere. So I tried to tune them out. I turned the radio on to the AM sports station and listened to the scores. A team had won—another had lost. A man was talking about what it meant. I switched to FM and scanned from one station to the next in search of something distracting. Nothing came, but the anticipation that it might was distracting enough to stop me from seeing that I was no longer driving to work.

I slept most of the bus ride. And I woke up looking out the window and wanting to go home. It was raining. I panicked for a few long seconds because I thought I must have slept through my stop. But no: we were passing the ramp for the rest stop Pop used to stop at whenever we drove upstate to see my grandparents when they lived there. That meant my stop was next. I went to the bathroom. I washed my hands and had a long here-goes moment in the mirror. Back in the seat I opened my backpack and took out the pint of whiskey I had bought at the liquor store next to the station before I got on the bus. I took seven gulps before the bus pulled into the station. It helped. I stepped off the bus feeling ready to get everything over with.

Now I had to find whoever this Eliot guy was. I walked around the lobby and the parking lot for about ten minutes looking for someone with a sign with my name on it. No one was there except a teenaged-looking kid sitting on the bench in the corner of the lobby staring at his phone. I figured Eliot was just running late. Or maybe he wasn't coming after all. At this point I was hoping he wasn't. I'd give him another half hour: If he wasn't here at eight o'clock I was going to walk over to the motel down the street and take the first bus home the next morning.

I sat down on the bench. A newspaper was next to me. I picked it up. A few pages in I found a story about a tiger that was starving at the zoo. Her name was Maya. A month back she had given birth to five cubs. But after a few days she had stopped feeding them. No one could make her do it. And no one could make the cubs eat without her. A week later all the newborns were dead. After that Maya had climbed to the top of the viewing platform and stopped moving. Food was brought to her. But she never touched it. She just sat there starving to death and gazing out at the crowds gathering around her as the food rotted.

I looked up. Across from me the teenager kid was staring at his phone. He was wearing a black bowler hat. It looked like he was texting. His fingers were moving fast. He seemed to have no idea I was even there. No one else was there either. So I

didn't feel rude about staring at him as if he were on a television screen. And he was nice to stare at. I could tell he was beautiful even before the moment when he all of a sudden looked up at me.

I looked away.

After a moment I heard him say, "Moses?"

I turned back to him. He was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his eyes narrowed. It sounded to me like he was asking if *I* was Moses. I wasn't. But that was Pop's name. So for an instant everything was all mixed up. But in the next instant I figured it out. He was Eliot. I told him I was Moses's *son*, walking over to him with my hand out for the nice-to-meet-you moment. He looked at my hand, but he never got around to shaking it. Not in a mean way—he just seemed out of it. He was looking at me as if I had just woke him up from a long nap that he didn't remember falling into in the first place. He glanced back and forth from me to the phone in his hand as if for some connection between the two. And then he smiled.

"Oh," he said, shaking his head. "I'm *sorry*." And from there he launched into a laughing explanation about how he had *totally* lost track of time. He had actually gotten here an hour early, he explained. He was sitting here waiting for the bus to arrive. And to kill some time while he was waiting he started playing this *game*? *Tetris*? On his *phone*? And he was *dominating*. He was in the *zone*. No, he was in, like, the zone *inside* the zone. And he was so deep inside that *zone* that he forgot he was even *waiting* for me. He looked around the lobby shaking his head.

"Here," he said, "see?" Eyebrows raised, he held the phone up for me, but from where I stood the screen was just a mirrored blur of blacks and whites—and I didn't understand what he was asking me to see. "*You* screwed everything up," he said. "I *sensed* you watching me. In the back of my mind," he said, pointing at his temple, "I started *sensing* I was being watched. And then I looked up and you're just *staring* at me—remember? And after that I couldn't play the game anymore. Because now all the sudden I'm *thinking* again. Now I'm watching *myself* play the game. I'm like: here I

am playing Tetris. And then I'm like: Why? You know what I mean? You can't play the game anymore once you *know* you're playing it."

I nodded. I was about to speak when the phone started ringing. The ringtone was the chorus of the Beatles song "Eleanor Rigby," which was one of the songs Pop used to play all the time on the piano.

He didn't answer it.

I sat down next to him.

He asked me if I remembered that song "I Am the Walrus" from the *Magical Mystery Tour* album. I sort of did, but mostly didn't. "Ah," he said. "I *love* that song. I'll play it for you in the car. That's my favorite song right now." He closed his eyes and sang the first verse, tapping his fingers on his knee and taking a deep breath between the second and third lines:

I am he as you are he
As you are me
And we are all together

He had a lovely voice. It was lovely in a way that was the opposite of Pop's. Pop's voice was all gravel and gasoline cans and broken glass. Eliot's was cold mountain rivers and rain clouds and round polished stones. And I didn't get the sense he was *performing*. It sounded more like he was just singing to remind himself how the song went. When he opened his eyes he seemed surprised to see me. I wasn't sure what he was smiling at, but I smiled back at him for a second before he turned and stared at the wall.

"So you're, like, a *Jesus* freak, huh?"

"No," I said. "I mean—"

"You're not?"

"I don't think so."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah."

“Shit,” he said. “Pop said you were a *Jesus* freak.”

It was weird to hear him refer to Pop as *Pop*. I was the only one who ever called him that. And as far as knew I was his only child. If Eliot was Pop’s son then he must have been adopted because he looked nothing like either of us. He was all one color and Pop was all another. I was sort of in between.

He took the bowler hat off and looked down as if to see if there was something inside. His index finger traced a circle around the brim.

“So you’re *not* a Jesus freak.”

“No,” I said, but I felt bad to disappoint him. I almost wanted to take it back and just say I was a Jesus freak to make him happy.

“But you do *believe* in Jesus, right?”

“I’m Christian.”

“You believe Jesus was God?”

“Yeah. I mean, in a way.”

“All right. So you *are* a Jesus freak,” he said.

“I don’t know.”

“That’s cool,” he said. He set the hat back on his head and tugged the brim down. “You ever *see* Jesus?”

I laughed. “What do you mean *see* him?”

“You know. Like: *see* him see him. Like a vision.”

“No,” I said. “Have you?”

“Me? Sure,” he said. “I’ve seen *visions* of him. I can see anything I want.”

“Can you see Jesus now?”

“Can I see a *vision* of him?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Right *now*?” He looked around the room as if to make sure Jesus wasn’t already there. “Sure. I *could* if I wanted to. You want me to see Jesus?”

“If you want to,” I said.

“All right,” he said.

He closed his eyes and sat up straight, resting his palms on his knees. After a few deep breaths he blinked his eyes back open again. And he did look different. All the wild light had gone out of his eyes. “*There* he is,” he said. He was staring across the room at the empty seat I had been sitting in before. He looked as if he was in some sort of trance state. Then again, when I think about it now, he looked no different than he did when he was playing Tetris on the phone. He was focused—that’s all. It just seemed weird because I couldn’t see what he was focusing on.

“How come I can’t see him?” I asked.

“You can,” he said. He turned to look at me. I could tell he had let go of the vision. His smile was back and his eyes were all glimmering again. “You want me to show you how? I can show you how. It’s just a matter of technique. See it in your mind—then see it in the world. It’s really simple. I mean: *seeing* him is simple. Making him move *around*—that’s hard. I’ve done it a couple times, but it’s hard. It takes a lot of practice.” He kept talking, but I tuned his words out and started just watching him talk. He talked with his hands. His right palm moved up and down in front of his chest as if he were summoning the words from inside his heart. “The mind is very powerful,” he said, pointing his index finger at his head in the way that I remembered Pop used to do. “Very powerful.”

He looked at me as if he had asked me a question and was waiting for me to answer. I nodded absently as if I agreed with him about how powerful the mind was. Not that I disagreed. I just didn’t really see what the difference was. It all depended on what the word *powerful* meant. I thought about saying that, but I didn’t, because I knew it was a dead end. We’d just end up admitting that everything was subjective and everything.

I asked, “What did Jesus look like?”

“The *vision* of Jesus?”

“Yeah.”

“*My* vision?”

“What did your vision look like?”

“Hmmm.” He thought about it. “You ever see that movie *The Passion of the Christ*?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“You should see it.”

“Is it good?”

“No.”

“Then why should I see it?”

“Because that’s what he looked like.”

“That’s what the vision looked like?”

“That’s *exactly* what he looked like,” he nodded as if the vision were coming back. “Like the guy who played Jesus in the movie. Mel Gibson.”

“Oh,” I said. But I had read a review of *The Passion* when it first came out and I was pretty sure that someone else played the Jesus role. “I don’t think that was Mel Gibson,” I said. “Mel Gibson *directed* it. He wasn’t the one who played Jesus.”

“Yeah he was.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I thought you said you didn’t see it.”

“I didn’t,” I said.

“So what the hell do you know?”

“I remember reading about it.”

“Well, I saw it. Mel Gibson was Jesus. And he looked *exactly* like the real Jesus.”

I shrugged and looked at the floor. Just then the door of the bus station opened. A man in a phantom mask walked inside.

I didn’t know he was wearing a mask at first. I just knew that something was wrong with his face. I looked away from him at the floor. Looking right at him seemed wrong. Besides, the picture of his face was already so permanently imprinted in me that I didn’t have to look. I saw him clearly in my mind. And then I saw that it wasn’t his actual face. It was a mask. It was the white mask from the *Phantom of the Opera* movie. It covered the left side of his face from his forehead down to his lips. In

hole where his left eye should have been there was no eyeball. There was just a flat wall of discolored skin.

I watched him. He was standing at the ticket window holding his palm against the glass. No one was coming to talk to him. After a few seconds he turned and looked straight at me through his one good eye and his mouth widened out into a long and lengthening grin. His teeth were all caved in and caked yellow.

“What the hell are you looking at, man?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I said.

I glanced sideways at Eliot. He was smiling as if he’d been through all this before—it was all a game. So I tried to act like I knew the game. I leaned back against the bench and faked a laugh.

The phantom took a step toward me.

“Hey,” he said. He held his right hand out and slapped the tips of his fingers against his palm: one hand clapping. “Let me get some change.”

I shook my head and shrugged. “Sorry,” I said. “I don’t have anything.”

“Come *on*, man. I know you got change.”

“No,” I said, “sorry,” but I did. I had a pocketful of coins from the store where I’d bought the whiskey.

“I need seventy-seven cents. ”

“I don’t got it,” I said.

“Give me some *cents!*”

“What do you need it for?” Eliot asked.

“I didn’t ask you,” he said, lifting his chin and looking down at me. “I asked this hollow motherfucker right here.”

“What do you need it for?” I asked.

“Ah,” he said, and switched his eye to Eliot. “I see. Y’all two are a team now, huh? I see.” He looked back at me and nodded as if he were impressed. “Shit, man. I got to make a *phone* call, man. My *family*,” he said, pointing his right index finger at the silver ring on his left hand. “I got a family. See? I got a little boy back home. He’s

waiting for me. Back home. My fucking car broke down. The brakes. The brakes broke. They're *broken*."

I reached inside my pocket. "Here," I said, holding out a handful of quarters and nickels and pennies. He took a sudden loping step and snatched them from me. Backing up, he began counting the coins. "Eighty eight cents," he said. "Eighty eight *cents*? I know you got more than that. Let me get five dollars."

"That's all I got," I said.

"Give me your wallet."

"Leave him alone," Eliot said.

"I ain't talking to you."

"That's all I got," I said.

"Let me see your wallet then."

"No," I said. I picked up my backpack and hugged it against my chest like a shield.

"You think I'm playing games?"

"No," I said.

"Huh," he said. "All right."

He turned around. I thought that was the end of it. But then he spun around crouching down in a fighting posture, wheeling his fists in front of his face and bobbing up and down on the balls of his feet like a boxer coming out for the first round. He threw a few hard jabs left and right. "Butterflies," he shouted. "Bees. Stinging the air. Floating through space. *Spacemen*. Star wars. Striking *back*. You know karate?"

"No."

"You never took *karate*?"

"No," I said, although actually I had for a few months when I was like ten.

"You never see *The Karate Kid*?"

"No," I said.

“I’ll crane kick your ass in the face,” said the Phantom, and he threw another whirlwind of punches, ducking up and under.

Eliot burst out laughing. I tried to laugh along with him. But it didn’t come out right because I didn’t mean it. I was scared as hell. And the Phantom knew that. “Hey,” he said to me, and stopped shadowboxing. He reached inside the inner pocket of his jacket and pulled out a small Swiss Army Knife. Without taking his eyes off me he drew a dull blade out and held it up to the light. “Don’t laugh, kid,” he said. “Don’t laugh unless you think I’m funny. You think I’m funny? You think I’m a fucking clown?”

“No.”

“You think I won’t cut *both* your eyes out?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head and staring down at his hard black boots. A hard kick would have knocked me straight out. And in that moment that was almost just what I wanted. Just to black out and wake up without my eyes.

“Hey,” said the Phantom. “Look at me when I’m talking to you. Don’t look at the floor. Look at *me*.”

I looked at him. He was pointing the blade of the pocketknife at the flat scar of skin where his eye would have been.

“You want to know how I got this scar?”

He leaned down and snaked his face so close to mine that I could have seen my reflection in his eye if I had looked. His breath smelled like death. He stood up straight again. “You want to know how I lost my eyeball?” he asked. “I’ll tell you how I lost my eyeball. I *cut* it out. That’s how. I cut that shit out *myself*.” He smiled. As if repeating the punch line of a joke we hadn’t understood the first time around, he shouted: “*I cut my own eyeball out!*”

“Jesus,” said Eliot. “Why did you do that?”

“You think I’m playing games?”

“No,” I said.

“Why did you cut your eye out?”

“You think I’m a clown?”

“No,” I said, holding my eyes at his.

“That’s right. I’m not a clown. I’m not an *animal*. I’m a man! I’m the phantom of the motherfucking opera!” He laughed an over-the top demonic laugh. “You ever see *The Phantom the Opera*?”

“I saw it,” said Eliot.

“I didn’t ask you.”

“No,” I said.

“Shit, kid. You never say nothing except *no*?”

“No,” I said, and for the first time I thought I was in control. That was the right answer: no. That was all I had to do—just keep saying no until I broke him down. He didn’t know how to process it.

“No?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Huh,” he said. “You know the *songs* though.”

“No,” I said, but that was a lie. I knew the soundtrack from back in the days when Pop used to play it in the car and on the piano. And in the back of my mind I had been hearing the cascading melody of the theme song and singing the chorus—*the Ph-a-a-a-a-a-antom of the op-er-a is there / inside your mind*—from the moment I saw him walk in with his mask on.

“Why did you cut your eye out?” Eliot asked.

“I *didn’t* cut my eye out!”

“But you just said—”

“That was a metaphor!”

“No,” I said.

“A *what-a-for*?”

“*Met*,” he said. “M-E-T. A fucking *metaphor*.”

“But...” said Eliot, searchingly.

“You know what a metaphor is?”

“Yeah,” Eliot said. “It’s like a symbol, right?”

“No,” I said.

“Say NO one more time!”

“No,” I said.

The Phantom leaned down and held the blade of the knife to my chin. “Say no one more time.”

“He just did,” said Eliot.

“Go ahead,” said the Phantom.

I looked him in the eye and sent the word out as a thought: *No*.

“Say it again and I’ll slice your mouth out.”

He was looking down at me.

I was trying to look like Eliot. Like I didn’t care. But I did care. I was pissed off. At some point in the past minute I had gone from fear to anger—from flight to fight. I wanted to punch his face in. I imagined springing up from the bench like an action hero and tackling him at the legs, slamming his head against the floor and taking the knife from his hand and holding the blade to his throat until he was spitting blood and begging for mercy. And then I’d take his mask off and kick him in the ribs. I’d throw a few crumpled dollar bills at his feet before I picked up my backpack and walked out the door without looking back.

Not that I would ever actually *do* any of that. But for a moment I really wanted to. And in the next moment I felt bad for wanting to. I was better than that. And imagining hurting him in my mind was just as bad as *really* hurting him in real life. If I really believed in Christ, then I wouldn’t have wanted to beat the shit out of him. If anything, I would have wanted *him* to beat the shit out of me. And as for the wallet: he needed it more than I did.

So I handed it to him. “*Attaboy*,” he said. He opened the wallet and looked in the back where the cash was. His hands were shaking. I was hoping he would take the

cash out and pass the wallet back to me, but instead he reached inside the front pocket and took out my driver's license. He looked back and forth from me to the license as though making sure it wasn't a fake. "That don't look like *you*," he said.

"That you in that picture?"

"Yeah."

"You're sure?"

"I was younger."

"What the fuck happened to your face?"

"Nothing," I said. "That's the same face I have now."

"Shit. That don't look like the same face to *me*," he said.

I looked away. I sensed that someone else was watching us, but no one else was there. No one was even in the street outside the window: Just the wind in the rain—and a distant sound of thunder.

He held the license closer to his eye, reading it. A sly smile crossed his lips.

"That's your *real* name?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Fuck kind of name is that?"

I said nothing. I couldn't think of anything.

He laughed. He laughed again and slid the card back inside the wallet. "I'm a keep this," he said, shaking the wallet in the air like a prize and then pocketing it. "Just in *case*, see. Now I know who you *are* now. *Remember* that. I'm watching you. I know your *name*. I know your *face*. I know where you *live*. You hear me?" He pointed his index finger at his head, holding his eye on me. "The Phantom of the Opera's *inside* your mind. See?"

I nodded.

He gave me another long appraising gaze. "Let me get the bag too," he said, sweeping his chin up and pointing down at the backpack still pressed against my chest. I handed it to him without a second thought, even though my first thought was to tell him no. He wanted it. And something in the smiling way he strapped the

backpack over his shoulders reminded me of a little kid going out to the bus for the day of school. He pressed his palms together like he was praying, his fingers pointing upward and his thumbs close to his chest. Then he bowed. “Namaste,” he said. “You passed the first test.” And as if to reward me he reached for his face, paused, and lifted the phantom mask off.

But nothing changed. Because underneath the mask was *another* mask—no different from the first. He was still the Phantom.

He dropped the first mask on the floor in front of me before he turned around and left.

After he was gone Eliot leaned down and picked up the mask. “Try it on,” he said, holding it out to me. “Maybe it has superpowers.”

“I don’t really want that on my face,” I said.

“Maybe it makes you invisible.”

“You try it then.”

“You’re the one who passed the test,” he said. “It wouldn’t work for me.”

He was serious. And his faith was hard to resist. So I strapped the mask over my face and looked at him. “Am I invisible?”

“No,” he said. “Am I?”

“Are you what?”

“Invisible.”

“No. Why would—?”

“Do you feel any different?”

“Not really,” I said, but I did feel different when I lifted the mask off.

Eliot left to go to the bathroom. I watched him walk down the hall behind the ticket booth. He moved with compact and unhurried grace, hardly lifting his feet off the floor except for the moment when he leapt to try and touch the ceiling. After he was gone I picked up the newspaper. On the first page was a picture of the tiger sitting on the platform starving to death at the zoo. She looked sad. I tried to imagine what was going on in her mind. Not that I could ever know for sure. Probably she wasn't thinking about the world in ways a human being could imagine. Still, she was thinking *something*. And she must have known exactly what she was doing. Otherwise she wouldn't have been able to do it. I mean: Killing her cubs and starving herself to death—that wasn't blind obedience to nature. It was a willed decision. She wanted to die. And she was dying for an idea. So maybe she wasn't sad. In her mind, maybe she felt good.

I looked up. Eliot was standing on the other side of the lobby reading a poster on the wall when the phone started ringing "Eleanor Rigby" again. "Pop," he said to me before he lifted the phone to his ear.

As soon as he started talking I felt jealous. He was talking to Pop as if he knew him. After a minute he handed me the phone. "He wants to ask you something. I'll be outside," he said, pointing out the window.

I said hello.

"Let me ask you something," he said. "What do you think of Eliot?"

"He seems nice," I said. "I like him."

"You like him?"

"Yeah."

"You should. He's your brother, you know."

I said nothing for a moment. Then I said, "I don't have a brother."

"You do now."

"Oh. So you...adopted him?"

“In a sense,” he said.

“In what sense?”

“A literal one.”

“When?”

“When what?”

“When did you adopt him?”

“In the beginning,” he said.

“Oh. In the beginning of what?”

“In the beginning was the word,” he said.

“In the beginning was...the *word*?”

“That’s what I said,” said Pop.

“What word?”

“What?”

“In the beginning was *what* word?”

“I just fucking *told* you.”

“You did?”

“In a *sense*,” he said.

“I’m sorry, Pop. I’m having trouble understanding.”

“Because you don’t fucking listen.”

“Well, I’m listening now.”

“*INN-O-CENCE!*” he shouted.

“Oh,” I said, and I felt a flash of understanding, as if someone had flashed a picture of the word from the inside of my mind: Innocence. “OK. See, I thought you were saying *in...a...sense*.”

“Innocence,” he said.

“OK. Got it.”

“In the beginning...was...the word...and...” He seemed out of breath.

“And the word was innocence. Got it.”

“And that’s what Eliot is,” he said.

“OK. So Eliot is...innocence?”

“A *symbol* of innocence.”

“I see,” I said, closing my eyes.

“You think he’s real?”

“In what sense?”

“A literal one.”

“Do I think he’s a real person?”

“As opposed to a fake,” Pop said.

“Sure,” I said.

“Because he’s *not*, you know.”

“OK. What do you mean?”

“I mean what I *said*. He’s not a real person.”

“Oh,” I said.

“He’s a puppet.”

“Hmm. Well, he seems real to me.”

“Well,” he said. “That’s because I did such a good job making him.”

I looked out the window. Eliot was leaning back against the window facing the empty parking lot. He was blowing bubbles through the end of the pipe he’d been holding in his mouth before. He dipped the pipe into a pink plastic canister of soap and blew a stream of small ones and watched them float up and away.

“Hmmm. So you actually *made* him?”

“I made everything,” said Pop.

“Out of what?”

“Nothing.”

“Wow,” I said, and sort of laughed.

“What, you think I’m *lying* to you?”

“No.”

“Why the hell would I lie to you?”

“Pop, I never said you were lying.”

“But you *thought* it,” he said. And he was right. I had thought he was lying. And I still did. But now I was trying not to. “Don’t think I don’t see your thoughts. I see everything. You hear me?”

“Yeah.”

“You understand?”

“Yes,” I said. “I understand.”

“No you *don’t*. You *don’t* understand. Bullshit. I just *told* you not to lie to me and now you’re lying to me *again*. You understand?”

“No,” I said.

“Good. You sorry?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“Better. Better, because you *meant* it that time,” he said. “You *felt* sorry. You said what you felt. See how that works? The word fits the feeling. Say what you mean and mean what you say. That’s all we’re looking for here. This is basic. This is basic level shit I’m asking you to do here. All you got to do is tell me the truth. All right. You tell the truth and we can talk. All right? No one’s trying to trick you. No surprises here. You’ll see. It’s an old story we’re in. It goes a long way back. You’ve seen it a thousand times before. Hey? You know this song?” He whistled seven notes. “You remember that song? From *Pinocchio*?”

“When you wish upon a star,” I said.

“What happens?”

“What?”

“When you wish upon a star, what *happens*?”

“Your dreams come true,” I said.

“Good. Now: Are you a dreamer?”

“Am I...I don’t know, Pop.”

“Think about it.”

“I am.”

“You thinking?”

“I think so. Yeah.”

“You think you’re dreaming?”

“Right now?”

“Man, I’m not talking about right *now*. I’m talking about right NOW. If you were dreaming now, you wouldn’t know it. Would you? No. You wouldn’t know it until you were waking up. Now if you’re *not* dreaming, then you *know* it. That’s how come you can’t wake up. See what I’m saying? It’s all words, man. You’re just thinking them. That’s all you’re doing. Now I’m asking you what you think. You think you’re dreaming this?”

“Dreaming what?”

“This.”

“No.”

“You’re not?”

“No. I’m not dreaming.”

“Then how the fuck do you expect your dreams to come true?”

“I don’t know, Pop.”

“See what I mean?”

“No,” I said.

“You seen *Pinocchio*?”

“I think so.”

“Well, there you go then. See, I’m Gepetto. Right? And Eliot’s Pinocchio. And you’re Jiminy Cricket.” He laughed—louder than I expected him to. “Oh *man*! That’s *exactly* who you are. I’m Gepetto....*he’s* Pinocchio....and you’re Jiminy fucking Cricket!” He kept laughing. I waited for him to stop. He started to stop—and then he remembered whatever he was laughing at and started all over again. “Jiminy fucking *Cricket*,” he said.

“I should probably go,” I said.

“Go ahead.”

“All right. So. Talk to you soon?”

“You’re talking to me *now*.”

“I know. I mean—”

“You want to get off the phone?”

“Yes.”

“No,” he said. “You get off when I tell you to.”

“Pop,” I said, but I didn’t know what to say next.

“*Pop*,” he said, sounding like a whinier version of me. “What?”

“Nothing. Never mind.”

“No, no, no. You were going to say something. What you going to say, Jiminy?”

“Nothing, Pop. Really. Nothing.”

“No,” he said. “No. Not *nothing*. You were going to say *something*. Go ahead and say it. What the hell were you going to say?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“Go *on*, Jiminy.”

“I was just—nothing.”

“Say what you’re going to *say*!”

“I wasn’t going to say *anything*, Pop.”

“Then *don’t* say anything. You got something to say, say it. You got nothing to say, then keep your fucking mouth shut.” He was breathing hard. “Shit, Jiminy. You’re letting us *down* here. I had high hopes for you. You were supposed to be the voice of *conscience*. Are you the voice of conscience or not?”

“No, Pop. And I never said I was the voice—”

“You’re not?”

“No.”

“Shit, man. You *said* you *were*.”

“No I *didn’t*. I never said I was the voice—”

“No, but you said you were Jiminy Cricket. I heard you say it.”

“No, I didn’t,” I said.

“Did too.”

“No. That’s what *you* said, Pop.”

“Me? No,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“I said that?”

“Yeah. Remember?”

“Huh. Then what did *you* say?”

“Me? I don’t know. Nothing,” I said. “I didn’t really say anything.”

“Well, that was my point. You got nothing to say—then say nothing.”

And he hung up the phone.

I stood for a minute wondering what I was doing. Then I went outside.

A light rain was in the wind. And all the fallen leaves were blowing in the light along the steps and the sidewalk. I was looking west past the roofs of the shops that lined the other side of the street and out to the mountain where Pop lived at the end of a long dirt road near the top. Behind the mountain the sun was setting and the sky was all sunset blue and beautiful in a way that wasn’t really beautiful to me because it looked too much like a picture.

Across the street Eliot sat on the edge of the sidewalk blowing bubbles and popping them with his finger. I walked across the crosswalk to meet him.

“I used to smoke cigarettes,” he said.

“And now you blow bubbles?”

“It’s cheaper. How’s Pop?”

“Crazy as hell,” I said.

“*You ever been crazy?*”

“Is he actually dying?”

“He’s been dying forever.”

“Does he have a brain tumor?”

“He says so,” he said,

He blew another stream of bubbles. Across the street the movie theatre marquee was blinking the titles of four movies in the following order.

THE BRAVE ONE
ACROSS THE UNIVERSE
INTO THE WILD
THE KINGDOM

I read the titles and seemed to see a story about myself: Against his will, the Brave One travels across the universe and into wild, where he finds the Mad King in his fallen Kingdom. “Come on,” said Eliot, standing up and starting down the street. I followed after him, feeling like a follower. He walked fast. I fell behind. I caught up with him at a corner intersection and we waited in silence for the walk signal to light up. “Hey,” he said, taking the pink cannister of soap out of his coat pocket and unscrewing the lid. “Watch this.” He dipped the pipe in the soap and brought the oval end to his mouth, breathing everything in. Breathing everything out, he blew a long bubble that grew and grew to about the size of a small football before it lifted out and up in the wind above the street. “Now *that’s* a metaphor,” Eliot said after it popped.

For what, I started to ask, but the walk sign lit up and he walked ahead of me again.

I followed him across the crosswalk and down the alley to the parking lot where Pop’s old Plymouth was parked in the corner. It was the only car in the lot. Eliot leaned against the side of the car and looked across the roof at me. “Let me ask you something,” he said. “Can I ask you something?”

“Go ahead,” I said.

“Pop,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“He’s got problems.”

“He definitely has problems.”

“And he’s dangerous, right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I mean he could be.”

“You think he’s a happy person?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him in years.”

“But you just talked to him. Did he sound happy?”

“No. Honestly, he sounds like he’s lost his mind.”

“He has,” he said. “He’s crazy. Like: A few nights ago he walked over to me and slapped me in the face. Out of *nowhere*. I was just sitting on the sofa watching a movie and he *slaps* me. Hard. And then he goes and locks himself in the bathroom with the shotgun and starts shouting about how he’s going to shoot himself in the bathtub so it’ll be easier for me to clean the blood up.”

“Jesus,” I said. “What did you do?”

“I talked to him for a while.”

“Through the door?”

“Yeah. He made me sing ‘Hey Jude’ to him.”

“And then he came out?”

“After like five hours,” he said.

“Wow. That’s good of you.”

“He didn’t think so.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing. He didn’t even look at me.”

“Well,” I said. “I’m sure God saw you.”

“Yeah,” he laughed. “I don’t really believe in God.”

“But still,” I said. “That just makes you more of a hero.”

He looked at me. “What do you mean?”

“You know,” I shrugged. “Being a hero means doing the good thing even though no one is watching you.”

“But you just said *God* was watching me.”

“Yeah, but God’s different.”

“How?”

“God’s blind,” I said. I didn’t know what I meant by that, but I meant it.

He fell silent for another while. “Pop would never kill himself anyway.”

“He loves himself too much.”

“Yeah,” Eliot said. “He thinks if he dies the whole universe will disappear.” He opened the driver’s side door and didn’t get in. “You ever think maybe,” he said, and tapped the point of the key on the roof, looking past me at the trees for a long time.

“Do I ever think maybe what?” I asked.

“Don’t take this the wrong way.”

“I won’t.”

“You think maybe he’d be better off if we just—if *he* just did it?”

“Killed himself?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Or if *we* just did it.”

“If we just...killed him?”

“Accidentally.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I said.

“Just hold on. Hear me out. I’m not—listen. I’m not saying we should, like, *plot* to murder Pop.”

“OK. So what are you saying then?”

“I’m saying if it’s him or us.”

“But it’s not him or us.”

“But if it *is*.”

“OK.”

“If he goes after one of us—we have each other’s backs, right?”

“I guess.” I opened the passenger side door. “I’m just trying to be good,” I said.

Inside the car was a welcoming mess of magazines and McDonald’s bags and cigarette packs and plastic cups and a cassette tapes all over all the seats and the floors and falling around. An open can of beer was in the cup holder. Eliot handed the can to me and turned the car on.

“I’m not a puppet,” he said.

He picked a cassette out from pile on the seat and pushed the tape into the player and pressed rewind as he backed the car out of the lot.

“Did he say I was a puppet?”

“He said you’re Pinocchio.”

“And what, he’s Gepetto?”

“And I’m Jiminy Cricket.”

“Nah,” he said. “*You’re* Pinocchio. *I’m* Jiminy.”

“And Pop’s Gepetto?”

“Pop’s Monstro.”

“Monstro?”

“You never seen *Pinocchio*?”

“I can’t remember,” I said. “Maybe.”

“Monstro’s the giant whale that swallows Gepetto.”

Just then the Beatles song started playing from the car speakers. Eliot started singing along with the first words:

I am he as you are he
As you are me
And we are all together

I leaned back in the seat and slipped the phantom mask down over my face.

Eliot, according to Eliot, didn't know where he came from. He sensed that he was born on some mountainous island somewhere in the middle of some distant sea, but he didn't remember ever living there—just a few stray images of sunlight and stars and water that might have come more from the forgotten womb of old movie scenes than from his actual life—because his mother left the place where he had been born and brought him in an airplane to New York City a few weeks after he turned four years old. A few days later she drove a rented car upstate and abandoned Eliot in the aisles of a video store. Her body was eventually found drowned in a nearby lake. No relatives were located. So Eliot ended up growing up in and out of a series of orphanages and foster homes in and around western New York. Pop had adopted him seven years ago, when he was eleven years old. And he still loved Pop, but in the past year or two he felt more like he was the father and Pop was the son. But that was all over now. Now that he had graduated high school, he was plotting his escape. As soon as he finished the first draft of his screenplay, he was going to steal a few thousand bucks from the safe where Pop kept his cash—Pop had inherited a lot of money from his parents—and head to Hollywood to break into the movie business.

He explained all this to me in the car as we drove the winding road up the dark mountain to Pop's listening to side two of *Magical Mystery Tour*. I drank the beer. I also took a Percocet from a plastic bag of pills he kept in in the glove compartment. He made me swear to Jesus not to tell Pop about his escape plans. "He'd kill me if he found out," he said. And for the next ten minutes, as "Baby You're a Rich Man" and "All You Need is Love," blasted through the car speakers, he pitched his screenplay to me: a darkly comedic sequel to *The Passion of The Christ* set in the days immediately following Jesus's Resurrection. "Everyone talks about the Passion and the Crucifixion," Eliot explained, sipping his beer. "No one ever tells the story of what happens *after* Christ rises from the dead."

His screenplay was called *The Trial of God*. In the opening scene, which takes place in total silence, we see the resurrected Christ—a dark silhouette filmed from a vast distance—stumbling across a desert landscape as the sun rises behind him. In time he reaches a campsite where his remaining disciples are gathered in mourning. At the sight of Jesus the disciples rejoice. But the initial surge of celebratory anticipation gradually gives way to a wave of dread. Everyone wants Jesus to talk. Everyone wants to know what exactly he plans to *do* now that has unequivocally proven his divinity: Is he going to avenge his death? Is the Kingdom of Heaven imminent? Jesus answers these questions with a perplexing metaphor about language. “The Kingdom of God,” he declares, “is like a word that wants to know its own meaning.” And then, as if to personify his meaning, he falls silent. He never speaks again.

Meanwhile the news of Jesus’s return spreads. In the morning a group of armed soldiers arrive at the campsite to arrest him. (Significantly, the disciples make no effort to resist his arrest; their faith is already in doubt.) And at this point the movie takes an anachronistic turn. Accused of an unnamed crime, Christ is brought to stand trial in what appears to be a modern American courtroom, where Thomas—the Doubting Thomas of John’s Gospel, envisioned by Eliot as a hopelessly idealistic go-getter type played by a young Tom Cruise—presents the case against God before an implacable Judge (Mel Gibson) wearing mirrored sunglasses, “like the man with no eyes in *Cool Hand Luke*.” A hidden camera films the proceedings: it turns out that the trial is being televised not just throughout the world, but throughout time as well.

No one doubts Jesus’s divinity. His return from death is seen as a definitive demonstration of his godly powers. And yet the miracle of the resurrection, according to Thomas, implicates Jesus in a crime far graver—and far less forgivable—than the one he was originally executed for. After all, if Jesus really *is* the one true God, then he is directly responsible for all the evils in the world. “Every person in this room,” Thomas declares in his opening statement, an excerpt of which Eliot performed in the car with a polished flourish, taking his hands off the steering wheel and waving

them about in an impassioned fury, as though he'd rehearsed this scene dozens of times in front of a mirror, "can envision a *better* world than this one. Every one of us can imagine perfection. What we lack is the power to *create* a world that corresponds with our perfect moral vision. *This* man"—and here the screenplay calls for a long close-up of Jesus, whose eyes reveal no hint of what he is thinking—"has *that* power. He has not only claimed to be God; he has proven it. Ask yourself: what would you do, if you were God? Would you use your power to create a more perfect world? Or would you create *this* world?"

The bulk of the movie, Eliot explained, focuses on the trial. A series of witnesses are called to testify against God. Each witness narrates a personal account of gratuitous suffering that was caused not by human evil, but by the vagaries of fate: A mother who watched her child get torn apart by lions, a seven-year-old girl crippled by a falling tree, a boy born with a deathly illness. Afterward Thomas asks each witness the same two questions: Did you pray to God? Yes. Were your prayers answered? No. Christ remains silent for the duration of the trial. Serving as his own lawyer, he declines to cross-examine the witnesses or call his own. Nor does he take the stand. He watches the proceedings with such a startling absence of affect that at one point the judge stops the trial to ask him, as if speaking to a child, if he understands where he is and what he is being accused of. Jesus nods. Yet he shows no sign of understanding. A montage reveals that the tide of public opinion has turned so decisively against Jesus that even his disciples are ashamed of him. "He was a good man," says Mathew in an interview, "but he is a bad God. And the fact that he was actually God all along negates his goodness as a man."

The prosecution rests. No defense is offered. The judge retires to deliberate. "And that's all I've got," said Eliot. "I don't know how to end it."

I said nothing. The road wound up and down through a dark hall of evergreens and left across the flat center of the overgrown acre of orchard where Pop used to grow apples and peaches and pears. At the end of the road stood the chicken coop and the toolshed. The roof was falling inside and branches were growing out from

the windows, but the basketball hoop still hung over the door and a white chicken was standing in the headlights staring at us as Eliot parked the car.

The house was still a five-minute walk up a trail through the woods.

Eliot turned the headlights off. He picked up the phone and dialed Pop. Holding the phone against his ear, he reached to the backseat and came back with half-full bottle of whiskey. I took the bottle outside and leaned against the hood of the car looking at the starlit darkness. Eliot was talking behind me, but I couldn't make out most of what he was saying. "Because I don't *want* to," he said, and I stopped trying to listen.

The Percocet was kicking in. I felt better than I had in a long time. I lay down on my back in the grass and watched the stars behind the big trees swaying far over in the wind, feeling as if I were gliding out from my eyes and falling up.

And then Eliot was sitting next to me. I leaned up and passed him the whiskey. He took a long sip and passed the bottle back to me. I took another long sip and passed it back to him. He took a sip and passed it back to me. And so on for a few dizzily silent minutes. He was looking down at the face of the flashlight—turning the light on and off. I was looking up at the stars, but I felt like I was looking down at them.

I had a bad idea. "You know what we should do?"

"We should watch a movie."

"No. Listen. We should just, like—"

"We should watch *The Passion!*" he said.

"No. Listen." I took another sip of whiskey and said it: "How about we just, like, *leave?*"

"Leave what?"

"Here," I said. "Just drive away."

"Hmmm. And what do we tell Pop?"

"Nothing. To hell with Pop. That's the point."

I looked over at him. He was pointing the flashlight straight up at his face—leaning forward staring straight down into beam of light like a scientist hunched over a microscope. His eyes were wide-wide open. “You ever do this?” he asked without blinking. “Pop taught me. You look directly at the light for like a minute. Fucks up your perception.”

I watched him. After another twenty seconds or so, he lifted his eyes from the light and looked at me with the same voided expression as he had looked at the Jesus vision at the bus station. “Holy shit!” he shouted, happily. “I can’t SEE!” He dropped the flashlight and reached his arms out at me like a zombie. “*There* you are,” he said when the back of his right hand brushed against my shoulder. I took his hand in mine for a moment, as if I were guiding him through the dark. And when he let go of me I wanted badly to hold on. I hadn’t touched another person—not meaningfully—in a long time. I had forgotten how real it felt.

His eyes came gradually back to light. After a minute he offered me the flashlight. Did I want to try? Not now. Maybe later.

I passed him the whiskey.

“Seriously,” I said. “Nothing good’s going to happen at Pop’s. We could go back to the car right now and drive out of here for good.”

“*Tonight?*”

“Right now.”

“And go where?”

“Wherever. West.”

“Hmmm,” he said, and his eyes bloomed. “We could drive to Hollywood?”

“Wherever you want to go,” I said.

“For real? You’d come with me?”

“I can help you make your movie.”

“You could play Jesus!”

“I’m not really an actor,” I said.

“You’d be a really good actor.”

I wondered if he was making fun of me. “Why do you say that?”

“I can just tell,” he said.

“From what?”

“You’re like Pop.”

“What, crazy?”

“No, not like that,” he said. “You’re hard to read, I mean. Like: Who the fuck *are* you?”

“I’m...” I started, but I didn’t know where to end.

“In a *good* way,” Eliot laughed. “That’s good for an actor. You’re mysterious as hell. I can see you slipping in and out of all different masks. And no one would ever know which one is the *real* you. You know what I mean?”

“Sort of,” I said, but if I understood him right, he had me all wrong.

He picked up the basketball from against the shed and took a flat-footed jump shot. His form was endearingly terrible, like a right-hander shooting left-handed—or the other way around, because he was a lefty. The ball missed the rim and rolled over to me on the other side. I passed it back to him. His second shot caromed hard off the bottom edge of the backboard and bounced out of sight.

“All right,” he said, walking over to me. “Listen. Here’s the deal. We leave tomorrow morning. Early. Before Pop wakes up. Tonight we hang out. Get him good and drunk—chill out and watch *The Passion* with him until he passes out. All right? As soon as he passes out,” and he paused for a swollen moment, as though working his way through a wave of second thoughts. “As soon as he passes out, I’ll sneak up to the watchtower. He keeps his cash in a safe next to the bed—in a black trash bag. I know the combination. How much you think we should take?”

“How much does he have?”

“A lot,” he said.

“Five thousand?”

“More like fifty.”

“Let’s take all of it.”

“Listen to you! That’s *exactly* what I mean. I can’t *read* you,” he said. “An hour ago you’re acting like Super-Jesus-Man. Acting like you came here because Pop needs your help. Handing your wallet over to the Phantom like he needs it more than you. And now all of a sudden you’re like”—he lowered his voice to robotic demonic monotone—“*Fuck Pop. Take all his money and leave him to die.*”

“Yeah,” I said, “but I’m not....”

I stopped. I was about to start talking about how the ends justified the means. How I doubted Pop really wanted to be saved. How trying to save a violently disturbed person with a shotgun might end up getting one of us killed. Besides: we needed the money more than he did. And we were going to use it all for a Good cause.

That was what I was going to say. And all of it was true from an outside point of view. But from inside it was false. Because the inside truth was I didn’t care about means and ends or right and wrong. I just wanted to do what I wanted to do.

“Whatever,” Eliot said. “I’ll take half.”

“Take it all.”

“I’ll take a lot.”

“Just leave him an empty bag.”

“Whatever,” he said. “Listen. I already got a suitcase packed. So I’m ready to go as soon as we get the cash. You don’t have to go back home and get anything, do you?”

“No,” I said.

“I’ll pack you some of my clothes.”

“Do you have another one of those hats?”

“Take mine,” he said, taking his bowler hat off. He placed it on my head like a blessing.

I pressed my palms together and bowed as the phantom had. And as I straightened up and pulled the brim down I remembered—I had forgotten—I was still wearing the mask. He was looking down at me.

“You really want to do this?”

I remembered the version of the Garden of Eden story that Pop used to tell me at bedtime in the summer I turned seven. Whenever he told this story—and he told it so often that I began to memorize even his pauses—he spent several minutes describing the “crisis of conscience” that took place in Eve’s mind in the moment before she eats the apple. He always stressed her awareness: She knew what she was thinking about doing—and she knew she wasn’t supposed to do it. And that was why she did it. Eating the apple was not a surrendering to the pressure of temptation. It was an assertion of freedom—a conscious choice to go against her programming. You can either do what you’re going to do, or you can do what you’re not going to do.

“I do,” I said.

“Swear to Jesus?”

“I swear,” I said, and I was aware of the irony. I was swearing to Jesus to do something Jesus didn’t want me to do.

“Hold on.” Eliot reached into his coat pocket and took out a square of white paper. “Sign this,” he said, handing it to me. I unfolded the paper. Nothing was written on either side.

“What is it?”

“It’s a promise.”

“A promise to do what?”

“Just what we talked about.”

I couldn’t tell if he was serious. But I didn’t see any risk in just going with it.

“I’ll sign it too,” he said.

“Do you have a pen?”

“No. You?”

“No.”

“Just air-write it,” he said.

So I traced my name in enormously looping cursive letters in the space above the page, dotting the i with a five-pointed star.

Eliot did the same. He stepped back and wound up like an old-timey pitcher and pitched the whiskey bottle hard against the shed. “Come on,” he said. We followed the beam from the flashlight in his hands around the shed and down the narrow path through the woods to Pop’s. And just as the light from the house was coming into clear view he stopped. “Hold on,” he said. “I want to show you something. This way.” He cut a sharp left away from the path and through a patch of thorn-bushes until he came to another trail that led steeply uphill to a flat clearing circled by pines. “Pop didn’t tell you about the Black Hole, did he?”

“No,” I said from a few steps behind him.

“He built a big hole out here.”

Built. That was the word that scared me.

“It took him three years,” he said.

“How deep is it?”

“You’ll see.” After another few steps toward the center of the clearing he stopped and pointed the flashlight diagonally down. In the ground ahead was a perfectly circular hole that seemed to emanate solid darkness. A rectangular slab of concrete lay beside it.

He flattened down on his stomach and crawled through the grass on his elbows like a snake. I crawled after him until my head was hanging over the side of the hole. He was shining the flashlight straight down, but I couldn’t seem to see the bottom. I reached a hand inside the dark. The soil on the side was smooth and cold. A narrow ladder descended into the dark.

“Forty feet down.”

“Jesus,” I said.

“I know.”

“This is incredible.”

“*Right?* Who *does* shit like this?”

“Did you ever go down to the bottom?”

“Me? Hell no.”

“But he does?”

“Sometimes. And once he’s at the bottom he makes me slide the lid over the top so he can’t get out.” He swept his eyes at the slab of concrete. “And then I come back after a few hours—however long he tells me—and open it. One time he stayed down there for three days. But usually it’s just an hour or two.”

“What does he do?”

“In the hole?”

“Yeah.”

“He says he hallucinates.”

“Hallucinates what?” I asked.

“God. He says he talks to God.”

“I thought he didn’t believe in God.”

“He believes in what he sees,” said Eliot, standing up. I backed away from the hole and walked after him back to the path.

At last the house came into view. All the inside lights were off. A narrow path wound through the grass and ended at the steps to the porch. As we walked up the path a bright spotlight turned on from the watchtower and a circle of theatrical light fell on us.

I blinked my eyes closed. Opening them I saw the gliding shape of some anonymous animal rushing away from the light and leaving a line of waving grass in its wake. And I felt a heart-burst of panic, as if I had wandered into a warzone: at any moment Pop might shoot me dead like a sniper from the branches of a tree or drop a bolt of lightning from the watchtower roof.

I turned around in a defensive circle. Nothing was there. In the spotlight the lawn looked like a landfill, littered with castoff furniture from the house: sofas and chairs and mattresses, desks and tables, computer parts and cardboard boxes brimming over with pots and pans and books and posters. Pop had started throwing

everything out a couple months ago, Eliot explained. Another one of his phases: he had watched a movie about monks last spring and decided to do what they did. Gradually, he was getting rid of everything he didn't need.

I followed Eliot up the porch steps to the front door. It was locked. He knocked three times on the door—a beat between each knock. No one answered. He knocked another three times. I pulled the hat down and touched the forehead of the phantom mask. Nothing could hurt me as long as I was someone else.

I waited. Eliot turned the flashlight on. He pointed the beam of light at me like the blade of a sword.

“Do you trust me?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“You sure?”

I nodded.

“Look at the light,” he said. He lifted the flashlight straight at my eyes.

I lifted my eyes and stared at the light. I stared until the light blinded me and everything was black as the bottom of the hole.

In the black light I heard the door opening.

“The Protocol Son returns,” said Pop.

I thought: *Prodigal*. But that was what he wanted me to think. So I cast the thought out.

“Hi, Pop,” I said. I took a blind step through the dark where the door was.

“Stop right there,” Pop said. His voice was close, but I saw nothing more than a vague shape in the dark. “Did I say you could come in?”

“Pop, come *on*,” said Eliot.

“Silence,” said Pop.

“But we’re—”

“You hear what I just said?”

“Yes, Pop,” said Eliot.

“What did I say?”

“Silence.”

“That’s right. You know what silence means?”

“Silence means no sound,” he said as though repeating a memorized answer.

I saw the shape of Pop backing away from the door in the dark. “Now when I said *silence*,” he said, “was I issuing a command or was I describing a state of affairs? What was I doing?”

“A command.”

“Complete sentence.”

“You were issuing a command.”

“Commanding silence?”

“Yes,” said Eliot.

“Then why do you keep talking?”

“Why do I keep...*what*?”

“You’re doing it again!”

“Doing what?”

“Talking!”

“I’m just answering your questions, Pop.”

“I didn’t ask you to answer my questions. I told you to be silent. Now you got a choice. You can either stand there talking about what the word *silence* *means*, or you can actually *embody* the meaning of the word. What are you going to do?”

Eliot said nothing.

“Not another sound,” said Pop. “You hear me? This doesn’t concern you. Go sit on the steps. Sit down on the steps and think about what you’ve done. And turn that fucking flashlight off.”

Eliot turned the light off and retreated.

I stood at the door looking into the dark. My eyes were starting to adjust. I saw Pop as a solid shadow seated behind the piano in the corner of the room. His face was too dark to see. His hair was longer than ever—a nested shock of Medusa tangles sticking out in all different directions. He had lost a lot of weight.

I reached for the light switch on the wall next to the door.

“Don’t touch that!”

“I can’t see, Pop.”

“NO LIGHTS.”

“Why not?”

“NO.”

“But...”

“Don’t ask me again.”

“All right,” I said. “Sorry.”

“I’m serious,” he said. “I got the shotgun right here. I got two bullets left. And I can see in the dark. You touch that light switch and I’ll shoot your eyes off your face before the fucking light turns on: You *and* your imaginary boyfriend out there.”

I turned around. Eliot sat on the steps of the porch looking at the trees. I was sort of disappointed in him for surrendering so easily. I thought we were a team. But still—I trusted him. He knew Pop better than I did. He must have known there was nothing to do. I was going to have to handle this part alone.

“Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Pop.”

“This is *my* house.”

“I know.”

“*I* make the Law.”

“I know. I get it,” I nodded.

“Do you want to come in my house?”

“If you want me to,” I said.

“Do YOU want to?”

“Yes, Pop.”

“Then ask permission.”

“Can I come in?”

“Ask nicely.”

“Can I please come in?”

“That depends,” he said.

His left hand struck a dissonant chord on the low end of the piano: a diminished fifth—the Devil’s Chord. It sounded bad, but in a good way. He played it again and again, speeding up and stepping hard on the pedal, and then stopped.

“Depends,” he repeated.

“On what?”

“Do you come in peace?”

“Of course,” I said.

“And what have you come for?”

“To see you, Pop.”

“To see me?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmmm,” he said. “Let me ask you a question. Are you a good person?”

“Am I a good person?”

“Yes or no.”

I didn’t know how to answer. It seemed to depend on perspective.

I asked, “From whose point of view?”

“Point of *view*?”

“It depends where—”

“From the *right* point of view.”

“From God’s point of view?”

“If that’s the word you want to use.”

“You’re asking me to see through the eyes of God?”

“Eye,” he said. “Not eyes. God only has one eye. And no: I’m not asking you to see through the eye of God. I’m asking you to see through your mind’s eye—to the Eye of God. Get it? Now answer the question. Are you a good person?”

I thought about it. If I said yes I would have meant no. So I said no.

“Then go home,” said Pop. “Thanks for playing.”

“Seriously? You want me to leave?”

“I don’t want you in my house.”

“Then why did you invite me?”

“I *invited* you,” said Pop, “because I *thought* you were a good *person*. I *thought* you wanted to help me. Now you’re telling me you’re an evil person. Why would I let an evil person in my house?”

“Pop, I never said I was evil.”

“Let me ask you something.”

“I said I wasn’t good. There’s a diff—”

“Would you let a demon inside your house?”

“I’m not a demon.”

“Answer the question.”

“Would I let a demon inside my house?”

“If you *knew* the demon was plotting against you.”

“How would I know that?”

“Because he’s a *demon*,” said Pop.

I thought it through. If I were a good person then I would give the demon whatever he wanted. If he were a demon he would take everything I had. The door to Hell was locked from the inside.

“I guess not,” I said.

“No guessing.”

“No,” I said.

“So why should I let you in my house?”

“Because I’m not a demon,” I said.

“You’re not?”

“No,” I said. “I’m your son.”

“But you just *admitted* you were evil.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You want me to play the tape back for you?”

“Go ahead. I never said I was *evil*, Pop.”

“No, but you said you weren’t good.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I said I wasn’t a good person.”

“Well, where I’m from that means you’re a bad person.”

“That’s not how I meant it, Pop.”

“Yeah, but that’s how you *said* it,” he shouted. “Shit, man. I don’t know about *you*, but where *I’m* from words have meanings. I’m talking *solid* meanings. A word like *good*, I’m talking about. That’s a word that has a solid meaning. You tell someone you’re not good? That means there’s no good in you. There’s no good in you? That means you’re evil. And I don’t know who the hell’s evil except demons and Satan. So either you’re a demon or you’re Satan. That’s just logic, man. OK? You see what I’m saying?”

“Sure, Pop.”

“What am I saying?”

“Words have meanings,” I said.

“That’s right,” he said. “And the meanings don’t change just because you change your bullshit mind about what you *meant*. The meaning is the *meaning*, man. It doesn’t change. It’s there. And it’s *solid*. You build a spaceship and fly to the ends of the universe for a million billion years? Eventually you’re going to see the word *good* floating around in outer space like a planet. It’s out there. All right? It exists. I’ve seen it. You see what I’m saying?”

In my mind I saw a flat black screen. In the center of the screen the word GOOD was spelled out like the title of a movie. But that couldn’t have been what he meant. It was too literal. So I asked him.

“What does it look like?”

“What’s *what* look like?”

“The word,” I said.

“The word *good*?”

“Yeah. You’ve seen it? Right?”

“I seen *all* the words.”

“With your eyes?”

“I seen them in the Black Hole,” he said, gently.

I asked him again what *good* looked like. He played another Devil’s Chord, repeating the question to himself: “What does *good* look like?” His voice was a whiny parody of mine, echoing back to me the note of entitled accusation I had tried to conceal.

“You want to know what *good* looks like?” he asked. “You want to know what I’ve seen in the Black Hole? I’ll tell you what I’ve seen in the Black Hole.” He paused. “Let me put it this way: Levels. Up and down. High and low. It’s like: Imagine you’re trying to talk to a *fish*. Imagine trying to explain the concept of numbers to a fucking *fish*. I’m serious. Imagine it. Imagine you’re talking to fish. About *numbers*. And you’re holding your fucking *fingers* up trying to explain to this fucking *fish* how—I don’t know—two plus two equals four. All right. *Imagine* that. And now imagine what the hell’s going on in the *fish*’s mind. Hell, the fish can’t even *hear* you. Can’t even *conceive* of *conceiving* of *conceiving* of hearing you, much less *understanding*. That’s what I’m talking about, man. Levels. Because between you and that fish? The *distance* in *levels* between you and that fish? That’s not even a *fraction* of the distance between you and me. All right? You see what I’m saying? Levels. High and low—up and down. You believe in up and down?

“I think so.”

“You believe in God?”

“Yes, Pop.”

“Is God up at the top or down at the bottom?”

“Up at the top,” I said.

“Where’s the devil?”

“In Hell.”

“Is Hell up at the top or—”

“Down at the bottom,” I said.

“Good. And where are you?”

“What do you mean?”

“What *level* you at?”

“I don’t know, Pop.”

“Heaven or Hell? Where?”

“I’m in between,” I said.

“No. You’re *not* in between. You’re at the bottom. You’re in Hell. And you’re going to die in Hell. Just like the rest of them. You’re just like the rest of them,” he said, and in his voice I heard a note of penitential desperation, as if he were starting to wonder if he was really talking about himself, if he wasn’t who he thought he was. *He* was in hell. *He* was just like the rest of us.

He looked like he was nodding off to sleep. But then he snapped his head back straight and asked, “Do you know who I am?”

“Of course,” I said.

“Who am I?”

“You’re Pop,” I said.

“Come on, boy. I didn’t ask you my *name*. I asked you who I *am*. Do you know?”

“No.”

“Can you see me?”

“No, Pop. Not clearly.”

“Do you want to see me?”

“If you want me to,” I said. “Yes.”

“Take that fucking mask off your face.”

I had forgotten I was still wearing the mask.

I pushed it back to the top of my head. I felt lighter.

“Look at you. You know what you look like. You look like a *rat*,” he said. “That’s exactly what you look like. Anyone ever tell you that?”

I said nothing.

“You want to see what *I* look like?”

“Yes,” I said.

“All right,” Pop said. “I’m going to show you then. I’ll give you one good look at me. That’s only fair. One look and the lights go back out. You ready? Get ready. Lift your hand to that light switch.”

I reached for the switch.

“Good,” he said. “Don’t flick that switch until I say go. I say go and you get one switch. *Up-down*. No middle. No pause. Up and down and you’re done. Don’t blink. You blink you’re blind. Got it? Good. Here goes. Ready. Set. Are you ready?”

“I’m ready.”

“Up, down,” he said.

“Got it.”

“Go.”

“Now?”

“Go!”

I flicked the switch. A flash of light: the Phantom.

Pop was the Phantom.

Of course he was.

Not that I had suspected it. So much else was going on in my mind that I hadn’t even thought about the Phantom since I left the bus station. And even if I had suspected, I wouldn’t have believed it. Because the Pop that I remembered from when I was a kid looked nothing like the spectrally emaciated figure I saw now.

In my mind I remembered Pop as a sort of paragon of pagan masculinity: a massive boulder of a man who tended his backyard orchard in summer mornings and swam in cold mountain springs in the afternoons and went out to hunt for dinner in the evenings as I lay uselessly on the sofa watching TV or reading library books. Even now, I seem to see him as he was in the prime of middle age: back in the woods in torn jeans and a red flannel shirt, raising an axe overhead and chopping trees into sleek rectangular blocks of winter firewood, or a few years later, smoking an after-supper pipe on the candlelit front porch with the gray cat asleep on his lap. He loved to argue. He loved to listen. He loved life in an effervescent way that strikes me now

as angelic, despite his demons. And he was always consuming something: cookies, candy, coffee, whiskey, tobacco. Even at night, when he condescended to sit on the sofa and watch a late night movie with me, his gaze seemed vigilantly predatory and ravenous, as if in the black space behind his brown eyes some insomniac beast were poised to pounce at the screen. As if he weren't so much watching as *eating* the movie.

He was objectively handsome. And he was handsome in the hard and timeless way of a solitary wild animal absolutely at home in the world—a man who never looked in a mirror for more than half a moment at a time. One late-summer evening, as I followed him down a freshly cut path through the woods, he turned around to hand me a flashlight, and I remember thinking, as I looked at his shining face, that he looked like the image of God in the Sistine Chapel painting: ablaze in beatific clouds of windswept light, trailing creational power and glory.

I was always the opposite of Pop. But when I saw him in the Phantom mask, I felt a flash of recognition. He was like me now.

“Get the hell outta here,” he said, his voice a veil of false anger—an honest confession of fear and shame underneath. I had seen too much. And for a moment I felt sad for him. He really did need me.

“Pop,” I said, “wait.”

“*Now*. Get out!”

“I want to talk to you, Pop.”

“*Out!* I mean it. And don't come back. You set foot inside this house and I'll pluck your fucking eyeballs out and rearrange your face until you look like me. And then I'll throw you in the Black Hole so you can look at yourself while you die. You hear me? You want me to pluck your eyeballs out?”

“No.”

“Then get the fuck outta my face,” he said. “Go back where you came from.”

“OK,” I said, and held my hands up in hopeless surrender. I turned around and walked away.

I walked as if I had somewhere to go. I walked past Eliot and down the porch steps and out onto the path through the grass. Eliot walked after me, screaming for me to wait up and slow down, but I kept walking faster away until I felt his hand on my shoulder. “Wait,” he said, and I slapped his hand away. He asked me where I was going. I told him to leave me alone.

“It’s a test,” he said.

“Whatever.”

“Don’t cry.”

“I’m not crying.”

“Listen. Just trust me. He’s testing you.”

In the grass a few steps ahead was the sofa that used to be in the living room. I sat down in it. Eliot sat down next to me. Neither of us said anything—not for a long time. I leaned down, holding my head between my knees, and closed my eyes.

I felt like I was going to throw up. I breathed the feeling away and fell half asleep. I slept for a few earthly minutes, but I had a dream that seemed to last twenty-seven years. I dreamt I was starring in a movie about my own life. I was doing everything I had ever done all over again. At the same time, I was watching the movie on a giant flat screen in an empty movie theater, and I was weeping and weeping.

I woke feeling a falling sadness. A full moon was bright above the black trees. Lifting, I saw Eliot leaning against the armrest on the other end of the sofa looking down at the blue light shining up from the phone, which he held in both hands a few inches in front of his face. His eyes were glassily oblivious. A sound of sweeping beeps and pops were coming from the phone. He was playing Tetris.

“Eliot?”

“Hold on.”

I waited a few seconds.

“Eliot, why didn’t you tell me?”

“*Shit*,” he said to the Tetris screen.

“Can you put the phone down?”

“I’m listening. Tell you what?”

“That Pop was the Phantom.”

“You didn’t know Pop was the Phantom?”

“No,” I said. “How would I have known that?”

“Hold on,” he said, staring at the screen, and I started to hate him.

“Eliot, answer me. How would I have known Pop was the Phantom?”

“How would you *know*?”

“Yeah. I didn’t—”

“He’s *Pop*, man.”

“Yeah, but—”

“How the hell *didn’t* you know?”

“But he didn’t used to look like *that*,” I said.

“Well, that’s what he looks like now,” said Eliot, as if that settled it.

He meant what he was saying. I could tell he wasn’t lying to me. So I wasn’t mad at him. Just disappointed. I had thought we had a secret bond. But no—we didn’t. *You’re just like the rest of them*, Pop had said, and I saw now exactly what he must have meant. Everyone was just like everyone else. So was I. Stuck inside: A whale inside a whale inside a whale.

Flashback: Summer after fifth grade, second week at Pop’s house. I must have been eleven. I had spent the better part of three straight days in the den camped out on the sofa—the same sofa I was sitting on now—with the windows shut tight and the blinds closed, watching a marathon of cable movies, eating microwaved hot dogs and drinking sweet iced tea as Pop worked in the garden and hunted in the woods. I felt no guilt. I was doing what I wanted to do. Still, on the afternoon of the third day, when Pop came in from the yard through the backdoor holding his hunting rifle in

his hands, trailing an aura of fresh smoke and radiating serene anger, I wanted to dig a deep hole through the hardwood floor and hide from him until he was gone.

He said nothing. Just walked behind the TV and pulled the plug, blacking out the screen. Then he told me to put my fucking shoes on and follow him. Minutes later, I was pointing the rifle at the first in a row of five empty glass bottles of whiskey that Pop had scavenged from the trash bin and lined up atop the picnic table about twenty feet away from me. He was teaching me how to shoot. “Don’t *aim*,” he said from behind me. “*See*.”

I saw. I felt my finger against the trigger. And at that point, sizing up the space between the bottle and the barrel, I was seized by an alien desire: to turn around and fire the rifle straight at Pop’s face. It was not a desire born of blind anger. It was born of bored indifference: the truant curiosity of a kid smashing anthills or a driver turning a steering wheel to crash deliberately into a tree. Just to see what would happen—that was honestly all I wanted.

Obviously, I didn’t shoot him. I chose not to. But I *could have* chosen otherwise. And that was what terrified me for years and years afterward. Nothing had stopped me from murdering Pop in that moment except an arbitrary act of will.

A similar impulse seized me now as I watched Eliot playing Tetris.

Watching him, I felt an absurd temptation: to make a hard fist and punch him in his face. I had no idea where this desire was coming from. No line of thought had led to it. But it was absolutely there. And the decision to obey the desire—or not to obey—was all mine. I could either do it or not do it.

So I did it.

I did it to prove I could.

I wound back with everything I had and punched Eliot flat in the face.

It felt just right. It felt just like the instant when, instead of turning the rifle on Pop, I had closed my eyes and fired at the bottle and heard, through the echoing blast from the gunshot, the clean crystalline burst of shattered glass.

I expected him to fight back. I really wanted him to. If he had fought back I would have let him beat the hell out of me.

But of course he didn't. He didn't even seem to think about it. He cupped his palm under his nose. A moment later he brought down a dripping handful of dark blood and, spreading his bloody fingers apart and together, began to laugh and laugh, harder and harder, and in a tone that seemed increasingly approving and impressed, as if he were just starting to understand some wondrous joke—and the joke was getting exponentially funnier the more he thought about it.

"You *punched* me!" he said, shaking his head.

"Sorry," I said, but I didn't mean it.

"You *punched* me! In the *face*!"

"Does it hurt?"

"Hell yeah it hurts."

His shirt and coat were all spotted with blood. He leaned back and pinched his nose with the napkin, still laughing. And I liked him again.

We went silent for while. I stretched my legs out to the other side of the sofa, so that the soles of my sneakers were touching his legs, and I looked up at the stars, blinking in and out of dreams.

"Someone has to be bad," said Eliot.

"What do you mean?"

"That's what Pop says."

"Someone has to be bad?"

"So everyone else can be good," he said.

"Oh."

"Get it?"

"No," I said.

"God is Satan," he said.

"Is that what Pop says?"

“God is Satan and Satan is God,” he said. His voice was an exaggerated parody of Pop’s, but it wasn’t exaggerated enough.

I fell asleep for a few minutes. So did Eliot. When I opened my eyes the stars were still out. The sky was the skin of a secretly colossal Leviathan. Was I inside of the Leviathan or outside? I wondered. But that wasn’t really the question. The question was: Was another Leviathan inside me?

Eliot was sitting wide-awake at the end of the sofa blowing bubbles. He slapped my leg with his palm. “Come on,” he said.

“Where?”

“To see Pop.”

“I’m staying right here.”

“I’ll go with you this time,” he said.

“He doesn’t want me there.”

“Yeah he does.”

“You heard him, Eliot. He told me to leave.”

“He always means the opposite of what he says. You didn’t know that?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“He’s testing you. Listen,” he said. “It’s a test. He’s waiting for you to come back. You ever see *Willy Wonka*? The old one?”

“Sure,” I said. I used to watch it with Pop all the time when I was little. Years later, I had seen the Tim Burton remake in the theater. And I didn’t like it. I didn’t like what they did to the Wonka character. In the original, Wonka was a mystery. But the remake *explained* him. It gave him a whole flashback full of backstory about how his dad, a dentist, forbade him from eating candy as a kid, as if that were the reason for everything else.

“You remember the end?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Well, there you go!”

“What do you mean?”

“Do what Charlie did.”

“OK,” I said, but I couldn’t remember. “What does Charlie do?”

“Give him back his gobstopper,” Eliot said.

And I understood: it was an allegory. Wonka was the God of Abraham and the Gobstopper was the everlasting soul. Charlie was Jesus. From every conceivable ethical point of view, the right choice for Charlie to make at the end of the movie—after Wonka has expelled him from the Factory—is to sell the Gobstopper to Slugworth (Satan) and give the cash to his impoverished family. But Charlie consciously makes the wrong choice. He forgives, giving his Everlasting Gobstopper back to Wonka for no good reason. Not because he knows it’s a test, but because he doesn’t.

You have to love God to death. And when God is dead, a better God is born inside you. That was the secret message of Christ.

I’ve claimed that I was a Christian. And I really *was* a Christian, at least in the basic sense that I professed to believe in story of the life and resurrection of Jesus, even though I doubted the details of it. In my mind the story of Christ was a metaphor that rendered irrelevant all the historical questions about what really happened. In the end all that mattered to me was the *concept* of Christ. That I could *conceive*, contrary to all the evidence of sense and reason, of the concept of eternal life and a perfectly loving of God—was proof enough. And at the heart of this proof was a promise: *Death is not the end*. For me, the story of Christ represented this promise. That was why I believed in it.

So I told myself I was Christian. I believed I was. But I see now what Pop must have seen all along: I was lying to myself. Not because my interpretation of Jesus was heretical, but because I never actually *practiced* my belief. I simply professed it. I felt no connection with God. I imagined that I worshipped in my own way, and maybe I did, but I’m not sure how. I never read the Gospels or talked to Jesus in my mind. I never sensed God’s presence in Nature. To be honest, I rarely even thought about God, except in occasional moments of insomniac panic when falling asleep required

taking long deep breaths and assuring myself, over and over again, that the resurrection of Christ granted my life a meaning that the death of my body would never annihilate. In the first few months after I decided to believe, I had tried very hard to learn to pray to God, but I could never quite figure out where the prayer ended and plain-old thoughts began. If God heard *all* my thoughts, then that seemed to mean I was *always* praying. So I didn't pray.

I mention this in order to give some perspective on what happened next. Sitting on the sofa next to Eliot, blinking up at the blind heavens, slipping in and out of sleep, I found myself, for the first time in my life, offering up a heartfelt prayer to the God I professed to believe in. I envisioned God as a colossal human face the size of the universe: An old man with white beard and black eyes and windswept hair, floating in the dimensionless dark behind the Leviathan sky, watching down at me with the infinite love and sacrificial concern of a new father gazing at his newborn son. He was here. He heard me. He would do anything for me.

My prayer was selfish. I asked God to help me. I didn't know what to do. Send me a sign, I prayed. Send me a sign that is simple enough for me to make sense of.

A sign was sent.

I felt a light landing on my lap.

I looked down. It was the gray cat. The same gray cat that Pop claimed to have shot in the face when we were on the phone. Purring, he clawed gently at my jeans. I rubbed his head.

Translation: Pop was playing games. Eliot was right. It was all a test.

I had to go back.

A few minutes later, walking the porch steps to the front door of the house, I remembered a story that Pop had told me long ago:

A Man of Faith is called to the front line of a religious war he doesn't believe in. He doesn't want to go. So he goes. His plan is to follow orders. But in the moment after the battle begins—picture whatever: smoke clouds and cannonballs and armored soldiers charging across a green sunlit field on a flat movie screen—a bolt of

paralytic fear strikes the man. The fear that he feels is not a form of cowardice. It's not that the man of faith fears death. He is simply and suddenly aware that in this context his faith is powerless. In this context there is no clear line separating a right choice from a wrong choice. Not choosing is also a choice, but that is all the man can seem to do.

So he waits. Standing absolutely still, he waits for his inner voice to transmit a clear direction from the mind of God. He waits until a stray bullet splits the vein of his neck. Bleeding to death in the grass, the man gradually comes to believe that his faith in God was misplaced. He lived his life all wrong. He dies cursing—it is his first conscious choice: to curse—the God he no longer believes in. And in the first instant after his heart stops beating, or perhaps in the last instant before he dies, the Man of Faith finds himself floating toward a fixed point overflowing with light: the Gates of Heaven, the Eye of God, the Blind Abyss at the Bottom of the Black Hole. He doesn't have to struggle toward it. A current is pulling him closer and closer to the light. If he wants to pass through the gates, he just needs to surrender the awful freedom of choice. He realizes this. He must make a choice. And this point, just before the Man chooses, the parable suddenly ends with a question addressed to the reader: *Where is the Kingdom of God: in the inner light—or in the outer dark?*

I walked up the steps to the door. At the door I took a deep breath.

I had a plan. And in my mind I saw what was going to happen in the instant after I opened the door. I wasn't going to say a word. I was just going to reach to the left and turn the light on.

In the light I would see Pop seated behind the piano, pointing the shotgun at me. He would stare at me through the eyes of the phantom mask. I would stare straight back at him. And after a moment of mutual contemplation he would lower the gun and break into a beaming grin and say just what the Phantom had said when I surrendered my backpack at the bus station: I had passed the test.

So I pushed the door open.

I switched the light on.

I looked for him.

He wasn't there.

I searched from wall to wall and all around the room. In the left corner, across from the piano, my backpack was spilled open—a pile of clothes on the floor. A line of candles and soup cans and liquor bottles stood along the windowsill. The windows were open. On top of the piano was a mess of music-books and papers.

And everything else was gone. No books on the shelf. No sofa or TV. Even the framed Portrait-of-Pop-as-a-young-man that I had drawn for him for the final project for a series of art tutorials he had given me when I turned seven years old (his most treasured possession, he told me one sentimental drunken night in the last summer I visited) had been taken down from its prized place in the center of the wall opposite the door. In its place, Pop had painted a perfect circle the size of the perimeter of the black hole. Around the circle, the walls were painted top to bottom in an artlessly chaotic Pollack splatter of primary colors: points and lines crossing through and crashing against one another, signifying everything.

A glass of water and a plateful of half-eaten dinner was abandoned on the floor next to the closet door: scraps of scrambled eggs and bread and a puddle of something that looked like applesauce pooling over the edges of plate onto the carpet. I pictured—and then I tried to forget the picture—Pop licking the plate like a street dog, crawling around on his elbows and knees.

I shouted for him a few times. I was trying to sound commanding, like a dad calling his kid out from a hiding place. But I sounded more like a kid who was calling for his dad to help him.

He didn't answer.

From behind, I heard a light rush of footsteps trotting up the steps of the porch.

It was Eliot. His face was swelling red around his left eye. He stood in the doorway surveying the room with the seen-it-all detachment of a movie detective arriving at a crime scene. "Probably up in the watchtower," he concluded. "Passed out. He's been drinking since noon." He was eying the door that led to the kitchen. "I'm *starving*. You want something to eat? Cereal or something? Eggs?"

"No. Is there any whiskey?"

"You've got to *eat*!"

"I'm not hungry."

"I'm going to make you an *omelet*," he said, drawing out the first syllable so it sounded like the sound that Pop used to make when he meditated: OM.

I followed him through the kitchen door. I sat on the floor and watched him crack an egg into a cereal bowl and set a frying pan on the stove. He cooked gracefully, moving through the kitchen like a dancer, making the long series of separate actions (stirring the eggs in a bowl, slicing vegetables on the cutting board, pouring the stirred-eggs into the sizzling pan, swigging a sip from a can of beer, slipping the finished omelets onto plate) seem like a single act. Every thirty seconds, he hummed the word *Om*.

"Hey," he said. "You ever meditate?"

"I tried to a couple times."

“Pop taught you?”

“Yeah.”

“Me too. It’s *boring*, right?”

He handed me a plate. I took it with two hands. He sat down on the floor across from me and took a sip of whiskey. In his Pop voice, he asked: “What came first? Chicken or egg?”

I laughed. That was the question Pop was always asking me to think about in the summer when he tried to teach me to meditate.

“It’s the egg,” said Eliot. “Right?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“It *has* to be the egg.”

“Not necessarily.”

“You think the *chicken* came first?”

“Maybe,” I shrugged my shoulders.

“Nah, it’s the egg,” he said. “It’s science.” He lifted the fork to his mouth and took a bite of the omelet. “You seen *Jurassic Park*?”

“No,” I said. “I read the book.”

“You never saw the *movie*?”

“I saw a couple of scenes on TV.”

“It’s good. Is the book good?”

“It’s all right.”

“Did you think it was real?”

“What do you mean *real*?”

“Did you think it was a true story?”

“*Jurassic Park*?”

“Yeah.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No. I read it when I was, like, fourteen.”

“Shit. I thought it was real, first time I saw it.”

“How old were you?”

“Like twelve.”

“Seriously?”

“Pop said it was real.”

“And you believed him?”

“I believed everything back then,” he said. “That was back when I first moved in with Pop. It was one of our first Movie Nights. Before he put the tape in, he did this whole spiel about dinosaurs and cloning. He said it was *based* on a true story that had happened a couple of years ago. And he said the dinosaurs in the movie were actual dinosaurs from the actual park. I remember he took out the globe”—he glanced toward the mantle where the globe once stood—“and pointed out this little island out in the middle of the Pacific. And he was like: *that’s where the dinosaurs live*. I wanted to go there, but he said tourists weren’t allowed to visit anymore because of precautions and shit. You had to get a special pass from the president to go.”

Listening, I felt a sad sort of protective concern for him. Pop had played the same sorts of tricks on me for years before I learned to stop trusting him. One time he showed up in the back of my Kindergarten classroom two hours early, took my hand and shepherded me out of the school and down the sidewalk to the front seat of his truck, which was parked in the handicapped spot, the engine running and the radio blasting breathless news reports about—I listened as he buckled my seatbelt and started out of the parking lot—a fleet of Aliens? Invading New York City? *Martians*, Pop said, eyeing the rearview mirror. *Big ones. A whole pack of them—and more on the way, apparently*. I remember him pinching the back of my neck, pitching his survival plan to me in a way that made me feel as I had devised the whole thing myself: Drive straight to the cabin. Hide out for a few days. Watch and wait. See what kind of aliens we’re dealing with, before we start fighting back.

Of course I believed him. I was too excited not to. And the radio sounded real enough. Not until about a half hour later, when Pop stopped at a 7-11 off the

expressway and left me alone in the front seat to “protect the car” while he ran inside to get us water and supplies for the cabin, did I turn around and see, in the backseat, an open cassette-tape case from the public library with a suspiciously eye-catching cover picture—I remember picking it up and studying it—of flying saucers hovering ominously over the NYC skyline. It turned out to be a modern remake of Orson Welles’s *War of the Worlds* broadcast, though I couldn’t read the synopsis well enough to understand that.

I asked, “When did you find out?”

“Find out what?”

“Pop was lying to you.”

“He wasn’t lying,” Eliot said.

“Yes he was.”

“Nah, he was just telling a story.”

“But the story was a lie,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said, swallowing thoughtfully and wiping his lips with his shirt. “It’s weird though. When I found out it was bullshit, I never even told Pop. Even when he talked about dinosaurs—he kept telling me he was trying to get a special pass from the government for us to visit the island—I played along like I still believed. Because I didn’t want to disappoint *him*. You know what I mean?”

I nodded. His plate was clean. He looked at mine. “You going to eat that?”

“I can’t,” I said.

“You don’t like it?”

“No, it’s good. I just can’t eat.”

“Can I have the rest?”

I handed him the plate. He took it and started eating and talking again. “Think about it,” he said. “Evolution. A chicken’s a bird. And birds come from dinosaurs. And dinosaurs come from eggs. So the egg *had* to have come first. Right?”

He was looking straight at me. I started to nod, but the plaintively wide-open look in his eyes—in the one eye that wasn't starting to swell redly shut—stopped me from saying the word yes.

"Maybe," I said.

"*Definitely.*"

"It depends."

"On what?"

"Perspective."

"Whose perspective?"

"I don't think either one came first."

"Bullshit. One of them *had* to come first."

"From a *human* point of view, one of them came first," I said. "From an outside perspective everything happens at the same time."

"From an *outside* perspective?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Outside what?"

"Everything."

I said *a perspective outside everything* because I didn't want to say God.

But then Eliot said, "You mean God's perspective?"

"Sort of," I said. "Not necessarily."

"I don't believe in God."

"I know," I said.

"Should I?"

"What?"

"*Should* I believe in God?"

It took me a moment to understand what he was asking.

"You should believe what you want," I said.

"Yeah, but I don't *know* what I want. That's why I'm asking you." He leaned back on his palms and stared at me as if he were settling in to watch a prepared sales-pitch

for a product that he was inclined to distrust, but was willing to reconsider. “I asked Pop already. He says God is dead. *God is dead and Jesus killed him*. What do you think? You think I *should* believe, right?”

“Not necessarily,” I said.

“Why not?”

I remembered what Pop said on the phone. Eliot wasn’t a *real person*, he said. He was a *puppet*. At the time I figured Pop was just messing with me. Because I assumed he meant it literally, like Eliot was an actual robot he had built. Now I saw what he really meant: of course, he was talking in metaphors. And metaphorically, he was right: Eliot *was* like a puppet. His thoughts were strings. If I told him he *should* believe in God, I was pretty sure he *would*. “I can’t tell you what to believe,” I said. “That wouldn’t be faith. If you only believe because I’m telling you to, then you don’t really believe in *God*. You believe in *me*.”

“But I *do* believe in you.”

“Yeah, but...”

“I have faith in *you*.”

“But it has to be your choice.”

“I *know*,” he said, his voice rising with impatience. “*Obviously*, everything’s going to be my choice in the end. I’m just asking you to help me choose.” He shook his head and laughed in a way that reminded me of Pop: a single-syllable burst that seemed to communicate admiration and disapproval the same time. “I don’t get it. Why are you being so selfish with your faith? Like it’s some kind of secret code you can’t share? Shit, if I believed in God who was going to send everyone who didn’t believe to hell? I’d be out in the streets shouting it.”

His tone was light. Less confrontational than perplexed. And in a way he was right: I was being sort of selfish. But that was because faith *was* sort of like a secret code. And everyone’s code was different. Mine wouldn’t work for him. His wouldn’t work for me. So you had to figure yours out for yourself—from inside. And if you

did manage to figure it out, you couldn't explain it in words. Not even to yourself, much less to another person.

At least, that was how I saw it. And that was why I hated talking about God and faith. I should have just told him that. Just shrugged and said something about The Great Mystery and let the conversation end or begin there. But I didn't. Because I felt defensive. And irritated. Offended, almost—at his simplistic conception of faith, at the monstrous fire-and-brimstone image of god that he seemed to be ascribing to me. Did he really think that was the kind of god I believed in? An apocalyptic Judge who separated the Good from the Bad and sent the non-believers to suffer in Hell? I wanted to set him straight. “OK,” I said, “I'll help you,” and from that point on, I was talking down to him, as if I really did know something he didn't.

Not that I was trying to. I was trying hard to do the reverse: To take the tactically probing approach that Pop used to use on me when I was a kid. Just keep asking questions. Keep seeking clarifications and examples. Act like you don't understand what he means, even if you think you do. Let him do the talking. So he wanted to know *if he should believe in God*. All right. For starters, I asked, what exactly did he mean by the word *believe*?

“Hmmm,” he said. He rubbed the bottom of his chin with his index finger and thumb. At last he said: “Knowing.” He paused. “Like when you know for *sure* that something is true. Even if you can't *really* know it for sure. And you *know* you can't really know it. You just sort of *know* it anyway. For *sure*. You know?”

I said I did. Then I asked for an example—something he believed.

As if he were already prepared for this question, he lifted the palm of his hand in front of his face and stared at me through the spaces between his fingers, which were spread all the way apart. “Like: I believe this is my hand. Maybe it's not. Maybe it's all the Matrix or some shit. Or I'm dreaming. But I don't think so. I think it's really there. I believe in it. You know?”

“I think so,” I said. His palm was still raised. I lifted mine to give him an ironically congratulatory high-five, but he didn't seem to see or understand—he just

sat there dazedly spreading his fingers all the way apart and then drawing them back together, as if he were testing them out for the first time—and after a few seconds of awkward silence I leaned forward and tapped my fist against his palm to remind him I was still here. He dropped his arm and switched his attention back to me: a daydreaming schoolboy dragging his eyes away from the window—back to the blackboard. “All right,” I said. “So you want to believe in God in the same way you believe in your hand.” He was nodding. “Which God? What do you mean by God?”

“I don’t know. Just...God.”

“Which one?”

“The regular God,” he said, as if he were ordering a regular coffee from a fancy café menu full of foreign words.

“Do you want, like, a Jesus with your God?”

“Nah,” he said. “Just plain.”

“No religion?”

“No.”

“Then which God are you talking about?”

“The real one.”

“Real?”

“The one that was here first.”

“So you mean like—the Creator?”

“Like in Science. You know Science?”

“No,” I said.

“In Science it’s like cause and effect. Like one thing causes another. Like a line,” he said, drawing a horizontal line in the air with his index finger and following it with his eyes. “And the line just keeps going back and back in time. But it *can’t* go back forever. Can it?”

“I don’t know. What do you mean by *it*?”

“It,” he said. “The line.”

“But what’s the line?”

“Everything.”

“Like the universe?”

“Like the chicken and egg,” he said. “Before the chickens there were the dinosaurs. Before the dinosaurs there were the trilobites. Before the trilobites there were—I don’t know—jellyfish and trees and plants. Before the trees and plants there were planets and stars and shit. Before the planets and stars and shit—there was just what? Space? But where the fuck did the space come from? You know?” He seemed genuinely agitated. “I asked Pop a couple months ago. *He* says everything used to be really small. *Really* small. Everything in the entire universe was packed into a like little sphere the size of nothing. Like so small that it was basically nothing.” He made a hard fist and held it up. “And then all the sudden the nothing *exploded*,” he said, opening his fist and shooting his hand out like an arrow. “That’s the Big Bang. That’s how come everything’s so fucking *big* now, supposedly....And that’s cool. I get that part. But that doesn’t answer the original question. Because where the fuck did the Nothing come from? Why did it explode? What was there before? Right? Either it goes back to God at the beginning, or else everything’s a big Nothing that never really begins or ends or even *goes* anywhere.”

I asked, “What do you want it to be?”

“I *want* it to be a God.”

“Why?”

“Because that would mean everything is real.”

This answer surprised me. He seemed to have leapt straight past the scientific question of where the world came from—a question that was already leading nowhere—and landed squarely on the spiritual one: What made everything mean anything?

I asked him what he meant by *real*.

“Just real,” he said. “Not fake. Like it actually exists.”

“What’s an example of something real?”

“That depends if there’s a God or not.”

“OK,” I said. “Say there is a God.”

“Then everything’s real.”

“And if there isn’t?”

“If no God?”

“Yeah.”

“Then nothing’s real,” he said. “Except maybe for me. *Maybe*. Everything else is definitely fake without God.”

“Everything?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because,” he said, as if I already knew, “God’s like the Camera Eye. He sees everything. Even all the shit you can’t even see. Like thoughts and dreams. Like: If I close my eyes and picture a flock of birds in my mind—God sees them.” He closed his eyes to look for them. I did too. They were there. “God sees the exact birds I see in my mind. And he can count exactly how many birds I’m seeing, even if I never counted them—even if there are too many birds for me to even count if I tried to. So God makes every one of the birds real.” He paused. “Same with everything else. Like this right now,” he said, waving his hand at the space between us. “I’m here. You’re there. I see you. But I don’t really *see* you. Shit, I don’t even really even see myself. No one sees anything for real except if God is watching. And that sucks. Because it *should* be real. If it’s not real, then what the fuck is the point? You know what I mean?”

I opened my eyes. He was looking at me. His eyes were an anxious blend of expectation and trust, like the eyes of a Dog waiting for a Man to throw a Ball. I actually *saw* this thought (the faithfully upturned eyes of some Platonically anonymous dog) in some distantly sunlit realm of my mind. And at the same time, somewhere else in the same realm, I was *also* still picturing the flock of identically unique black birds gliding motionlessly against the blaze of a white sky—so clearly I later returned to the picture as if it were a painting and counted the exact number of

birds. At the same time, I *also* saw what I was actually looking at: Eliot sitting across from me in the kitchen light. I saw everything at once, without even closing my eyes.

“Everything is real,” I said.

I didn’t know where these words came from. But I delivered them as if I did. So I must have known something I didn’t know.

“How do you know?”

“I just know.”

“Then that means God’s real?”

“Yeah. But that’s not really the question. The *real* question,” I said, and then I paused. For effect. And at some point during this deliberately drawn-out pause I became aware of how ridiculous I was starting to sound—how patronizing and pretentious. I sounded like Pop. Except worse. Much worse. Pop may have been violently condescending, but at least he owned up to it. He *knew* he was on a higher plane than you—and he let you know it. Me? I concealed my arrogance beneath such a heavy veil of Christian humility and Socratic deference that I actually believed (well, most of the time) that I was a decent and humble person. And in the moments when the mask slipped I hated myself to the exact degree that Pop loved himself.

This was one of those moments. In another moment I might have surrendered the rest of the night to a void of self-lacerating insomnia. What spared me now was the certain sense that Eliot didn’t see me in the way that I was seeing myself. He really did want to know what the real question was.

The real question, I said, was whether God was good.

Without hesitation, Eliot answered yes. Of course God was good.

I asked how he knew.

“That’s just who God is,” he shrugged. “Like: imagine if God came down to earth and started acting bad? If He started torturing all the people who didn’t bow down to him and believe he was the True God? You know what I’d do? I’d walk right to up to that God and be like: *Fuck you. You’re not the real God—you’re a fake.* I’d say

that shit right to his fat face. Swear to God I would. I wouldn't give a fuck. Even if everyone else in the world believed He was the real God, I'd still say it."

He was grinning. I could tell he was already playing out the scenario in his mind like an action movie, seeing himself as the righteous hero. So I asked him what would happen next—after he rebelled against God.

"Well," he said, "God's going to be pissed at me. Naturally. He can't have some punk kid questioning him. So what I bet He does—instead of just killing me? I bet he tries to make an example of me. He makes a big International Event about it. Like a reality show. All about how He's going to *convert* me. How I'm the last man in the universe who doesn't believe in the one true God—and now it's time for me to face the truth. That's the tagline that comes up in all the promos for the show before it starts: Just a picture of my face with the word CONVERSION written in big letters at the top—and the tagline underneath: Face the Truth.

"And the ads run for weeks, all over the universe. So by the time the show starts, everyone's watching. And everyone hates me. I'm like the escape-goat for the whole universe. As soon as the show starts, the camera pans through the crowd: a whole soccer stadium full of people raising their fists in the air and chanting, *Off with his head!* And there I am in the middle of everything. I'm hog-tied to a chair right in the center of the field. Blindfolded—all bruised up and bloody already because God's supposed Angels all took turns slapping me around and spitting on me before the show. At first you see me like a silhouette from far away, but then the camera zooms in on me and I lift my head.

"And that's when the Bad God comes out. He comes out in a mask—you don't see his face—and walks around me in a circle with his hands clasped behind his back, watching his feet, and the first thing he does, he tries to make a deal with me. He's like: *Listen, Eliot. This is your last chance. Admit that I'm the true God and I'll let you go. You have my word.* Acting all merciful. But he knows I'm not going to call him the True God. And I know he wouldn't actually let me go even if I did call him the true God. So I don't say anything. I just stare straight through him like: *Nope. Not going to happen.*

He walks around me one more time, thinking. And next thing I know: Bam! Bam! Bam!”

He started punching the air like a boxer: Two left-handed jabs and then a right-handed uppercut.

“He beats the hell out of me. So bad that I black out for a minute. When I wake up everything’s a blur of blood and tears. He’s standing right behind me—the Bad God. His hand’s on my shoulder. A sharp knife against my throat—I can feel the blade. And I hear the crowd screaming: *Do it! Do it!* And so he does it. Just like that. Slices my head off—holds my face up for the crowd to adore like a fucking championship trophy. Except here’s the thing: Right *before* Bad God cuts my head off? He does something. He leans down to my ear and whispers something to me. Just one word that no one else can hear. Do you know what the word is?”

“No.”

“Good.”

“What is it?”

“I just told you.”

“Oh,” I said. “*Good?*”

“Yeah. Like: Good job. That’s how he says it.”

“What does he mean?”

“Just what he says.”

“And then what happens?”

“At first everyone is happy as hell,” he said. “And I can *see* it. Even though I’m just a head, I can still see everything happening around me for a few seconds before I die. I can see everyone cheering for me. And I die thinking maybe that’s what the Bad God meant: maybe my death was good because it made everyone happy. But then,” he said, “the instant after I die, the *real* God comes down from heaven. Not in a way that anyone can see. Because He’s not like a person—the real God. He’s not like Superman or something. He’s more like a *presence*. Like a *voice* that everyone hears in their heads at the same time. Like thought. Like the exact voice that you hear in your

head when you think? That's how everyone hears God. So everyone believes they're thinking for themselves, even though the truth is they're hearing the voice of God in their heads. And the voice says the same thing to everyone. It says: *What are you doing?* That's all it says. Just that one question: What are you doing? And just like that—everyone just stops everything. Everyone stops what they're doing and starts *thinking* about what they've done. Thinking: *Why did we just kill this kid? What for? What's the point?* Thinking all these questions no one can answer. And then...And then....”

He fell silent. Suddenly pensive. To that point, he had spoken with the wildly freewheeling abandon of a seven-year old kid playing make-believe in the backyard, acting out all the roles as if no one were watching him. Now he spoke as if he were seeing each word before he said it. “I don’t know what happens,” he said. “I don’t know. I just don’t know. I don’t really know anything. Like: what the fuck do I know? Nothing. That’s all I fucking know is nothing.” He shook his head. And he leaned forward looking down at floor with his hand on his chin and his elbow on his knee. I watched him think.

Then he was nodding. His expression changed. He was smiling like he had just learned how a magic trick worked. Sitting up, he shrugged and made a conclusive *hmmmm* sound that seemed to mean: *Either way.*

“OK,” he said, looking at me. “I believe.”

“In God?”

“All of it.”

“Just like that?”

“Yup,” he said.

I wondered if he was making fun of me. But I doubted it. Looking at him I sensed that something really had changed.

He went to go take a shower. I poured a shot of whiskey and drank it. And then another. I kept hoping that the next drink would be the one that blacked me out for the night, but everything kept getting brighter. After a minute I walked to the piano in the living room and sat down on the bench. A book of Beatles sheet music was on

the stand, open to “Yellow Submarine.” Pop’s handwriting was all over the page. He had crossed out Lennon / McCartney and written his own name. Then he had crossed out all the lyrics and rewritten new ones in his deliberate ballpoint print. I started playing out the chords, singing the words that Pop had written.

In the time before the end
Everything was very small
And we lived inside the dark
All in one and one for all

Then I said: *Let there be light*
And every one of us broke apart
That was where the end began
And the end is where I start

We all live in a whale inside a whale
A whale inside a whale
A whale inside a whale

I looked up. Eliot was standing in the doorway, holding an icepack against his left eye. He was wearing an enormous pajama shirt that hung down to his knees. His hair was down and dripping wet over his shoulders. He looked so blindingly clean and beautiful that I had to look away from him.

“I’m feeling it,” he said.

“Feeling what?”

“Faith.”

“Oh.”

He took a few steps toward me and sat in the corner of the room with his back against the wall. A minute of silence passed. He was staring straight ahead as if reading something on the wall.

I asked, “How does it feel?”

“Hmmm?”

“Faith.”

He shook his head awake. “You’re asking me—wait: What?”

“You said you’re feeling faith. How does it feel?”

“It feels different,” he said.

“Is it good or bad?”

“Good. I think. I mean—it’s not bad. Just...different. For me, I mean. But I like it. I feel lighter. Like a valve opening in the back of my brain. And everything is draining out from the back. You know?”

I nodded. He took the icepack away from his face. His eye reminded me of the eye of the one-eyed Phantom at the bus station. And then I remembered—not that I had forgotten—the Phantom was Pop. Had Pop really cut his own eye out?

I asked Eliot.

A shudder went through him. He seemed to shake his head no and nod yes at the same time. “Apparently,” he said. “I wasn’t there, but he says he did it himself—with his pocketknife.”

“Jesus Christ,” I said. “Why?”

“He wanted to look at it.”

“At what? His eyeball?”

“Yeah.”

“But...”

“He wanted to see what it looked like.”

“But couldn’t he have just looked in a mirror?”

“That’s what *I* said. But Pop was like: Nope. A mirror just shows a *reflection*. He wanted to see his *real* eye—in *real* life.”

I tried to look at my left eye with my right eye. It wasn’t working.

“He talked about it for months before he did it,” Eliot said. “Kept telling me he was going to. I thought he was just fucking around, but then I came home from school one day—this was like three years ago—and he was up in the watchtower screaming like a fucking animal for me to come help him. I ran up. He was lying flat on his back—a big mummy rag all wrapped around and around the whole left side of his face. Blood all over the blankets. A tray full of shiny medical tools on the table

next to the bed. I was like: Pop? What the fuck happened? And then he opened his fist—and there was the eyeball. Just resting right in the center of his palm.” Another shudder. “I called the ambulance. He was in Intensive Care for a couple days. After that, he spent like a week taking tests in the psych ward in the hospital basement, but all the head doctors ended up telling me there was really nothing the matter with him.”

“What did he do with the eye?”

“It’s up in my room,” he said, standing up and rubbing his eyes. “In an old pickle jar. Floating around in some liquid preservative. He gave it to me for Christmas last year—wrapped up in a ribbon and a bow and everything. You want to see it? Come on. We can watch a movie.”

He was already making his way to the staircase. I picked up my backpack and followed him up the steps. At the top of the steps he turned left down the hall to the bedroom I used to sleep in. I stopped at the bathroom to change. I ended up kneeling over the toilet thinking I was going to throw up, but nothing came and after a few minutes I felt better again. I got ready for bed. Coming out of the bathroom I looked down the hall to the door that led up to the watchtower where Pop slept. It was dark. I felt a force inside me wanting to open the dark and go up there. Just to look at him. But I knew I didn’t really want to.

In the bedroom I found Eliot seated on the floor sifting through an enormous box full of DVDs. The floor was a mess of open DVD cases. Without looking at me, he asked me if I was feeling all right. I nodded. He lifted his chin and pointed at the table next to the bed in the corner of the room.

The jar was there. I sat down on the bed to look. The eyeball was more intact than I expected. And bigger. Speckled with spots of blood. Resting at the bottom of the jar. I picked the jar up to look closer. It drifted up like some monstrous fish coming up to feed, turning until it looked back at me.

I couldn’t look at it without feeling like it was seeing me. And asking me for something. So I tried to look at anything else.

A lamp without a shade was shining down from the top of the bookshelf, where I noticed a tall stack of children's Beginner books—each with a picture of The Cat in the Hat on the spine. I recognized them from when Pop used to read to me.

"I can't find the fucking passion," Eliot said.

A few seconds later I realized that he must have meant *The Passion of the Christ*—the Mel Gibson movie that he told me he wanted us to watch together when we were at the bus station.

"We can watch something else," I said.

"I know it's in here somewhere."

He kept searching. He was taking longer than he needed to. He would stare at the cover of each individual DVD case for several seconds as if to make absolutely sure there were no pictures of Jesus there before he cast it aside and reached in the box for the next one. I thought about helping him search, but I was hesitant to disrupt his rhythm.

Then he held up a case for me to see. "Is this it?"

A picture of a crucified Jesus was on the cover. But it wasn't *The Passion of the Christ*. "That's *Jesus Christ Superstar*," I said.

He seemed skeptical. "Superstar?"

"That's not *The Passion*."

"It's not?"

"No."

"But that's Jesus, isn't it?"

He tapped a finger at the cover picture, tilting his head to look back at it.

"Yeah," I said.

"So this is the Jesus movie," he said. "Right?"

"Yeah. It's just not the Mel Gibson one."

"But it's about Jesus?"

"Yeah."

"The real Jesus?"

“Sort of. It’s a musical.”

“Cool,” he said. “I just want to see Jesus.”

A few minutes later we were sitting up on the bed with the laptop between us watching the first scene of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Judas was looking down from the rocks singing about how the disciples had too much heaven on their minds.

Eliot pointed at the screen: “Who’s that?”

“Judas,” I said.

“He’s the bad guy?”

“No.”

“I thought Judas was the bad guy.”

“No,” I said. “He was just...” I was too tired to decide how to complete the sentence. So I just let the word *just* stand. He was just.

“I like him.”

“Me too,” I said.

“Did Jesus like him?”

“Jesus loved everybody,” I said.

“But Judas hates Jesus,” he said.

“No,” I said. “I think Judas loved Jesus.”

“Hmmm.” He had his finger hooked in his mouth in a sleepily meditative way.

“So Judas loves Jesus,” he said, “And Jesus loves Judas. But then Judas kills Jesus on the cross. And Jesus comes back from the dead and sends Judas to hell. Right?”

In my mind I played back what he had said. It seemed all wrong, but I couldn’t identify what exactly was wrong about it.

“There are different interpretations,” I said.

“That’s the one Pop told me,” he said.

“I thought you saw this movie.”

“No, I saw the other one.”

“*The Passion?*”

“Yeah.”

“It’s the same story.”

“Yeah, but to be honest? I didn’t really know what the fuck was going on in that *Passion* movie. It was in another language.”

“But there were subtitles. Weren’t there?”

“That’s the words at the bottom?”

“Yeah. Did you read them?”

“No.”

“You never read the Bible?”

“No, I can’t read too good, actually.”

“Oh,” I said. I didn’t know what to say.

“I can read certain words. Like *Cat in the Hat* and shit.” He pointed his eye toward the Beginner books on the shelf. “Just not like—the long ones.” He paused. “I don’t see why we need so many words anyway. There should just be like *one* word. That’s all we need. Just one word that means *everything* at the same time. And then instead of talking all the time we could just say the one word over and over again. Or we wouldn’t even *have* to say it. Because everyone would already know it. Everyone would know what everyone else is thinking. So everyone would understand each other. Is that what heaven’s supposed to be like?”

I thought about it. “Sort of.”

“It must be,” he said. “And then hell would have to be a place where everyone’s thinking all *different* words all the time. You know? Like everyone speaks their own private language in hell. Everyone’s just talking over each other. So no one else can see what anyone else is trying to say. And the worst part is? All everyone in hell is even trying to do is to say that one word that everyone in heaven is saying. But they can’t say it. Because they don’t know what it is.”

He was looking at the screen. I asked, “What would the word be?”

“I don’t know. Just a word.”

“What kind of word?”

“A sound,” he said.

“What would it sound like?”

“It wouldn’t sound like a word,” he said. “It would sound like what it actually *is*. So if you said it, you’d actually *be* it. You know?”

I nodded. Then we were both quiet for a long time listening to the movie.

But I kept thinking about what he had said about not being able to read. It didn’t make sense. I looked at the eyeball and said, “Didn’t you tell me you were writing a screenplay?”

He nodded. “Trying to.”

“But you can’t read?”

“Not much.”

“But you can write?”

“Up here,” he said, pointing at his head. “I just think the words. I don’t write them down. That’s what I need you for. You’re the writer.”

“I’m not a writer,” I said.

“You’re not?”

“No.”

“Then what the fuck are you?”

“I’m just—not a writer.”

“Well, Pop says you’re the writer.”

“When did he say that?”

“What?”

“When did he say I was a writer?”

“He says it all the time. He says you’re the Writer and I’m the Goat.”

“You’re the Goat?”

“The Greatest of All Time.”

“Oh.”

“It’s an anagram.”

“Acronym,” I said.

“He said it was an anagram.”

A few minutes passed. I was starting to drift when Eliot sat up and asked: “Do you think Pop’s a bad guy or a good guy?”

“Neither,” I said. “He’s just sick.”

“Sick in the head?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Do you think Judas was sick in the head?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Maybe Judas had a brain tumor.”

“Maybe.”

“If Judas had a brain tumor,” he said, and then he trailed off.

“I don’t think it matters if—”

“Hold up,” he said, sitting up in the bed. “Hear me out. I’m just talking hypotheticals. Just *hypothetically*: Say Judas *did* have a brain tumor. All right? And say that’s the whole reason that made him betray Jesus: Because he wasn’t thinking straight—because the tumor was fucking up his thoughts. So it wasn’t Judas that did it. You see what I’m saying?”

“I think so,” I said.

“If it was a *brain* tumor—”

“Then it wasn’t his fault,” I said. “Right?”

“No,” he said. “I mean—that’s true. But that’s not what I’m saying.” He leaned back again and closed his eyes, rubbing the side of his head. “I’m saying: if Judas had a brain tumor, if that was the whole reason he betrayed Jesus, then why the *fuck* didn’t Jesus heal it? Right? He was healing *everybody*. Everybody who went up to him and asked for help—he help him. Why the hell wouldn’t he heal one of his own disciples?”

“But Judas didn’t ask for help.”

“Because he didn’t know he had a fucking brain tumor!”

“OK,” I said.

“Jesus was the only one who knew!”

“You’re right,” I said.

He was looking at the screen. Within seconds, he was asleep.

I watched another few scenes. At some point in the scene where Mary sings “Everything’s All Right,” I fell asleep. I had a long nightmare, but when I woke up Mary was still singing the same song about how everything was all right now, everything was fine.

I couldn’t sleep. Every time I closed my eyes I felt like I was falling down the black hole.

After a while I stopped trying. I took the flashlight and went down the stairs to the kitchen bathroom. Walking back, I saw that the door to the watchtower was open a few inches. Without thinking, I pushed it open and shined the light steeply up the ladder, listening to the sound of Pop sleeping. His breathing was an unsteadily staggered kind of wheezing.

I crawled up the ladder to look at him. At the top I turned the flashlight off and waited for my eyes to see in the dark.

Pop was sleeping on a flat mattress under the window. He was wearing his mask and a pair of white underwear slipping so far below his waist that I could see his pubic hair. Nothing else. He slept on his side—the eyeless side of his face pressed against a pillow. His head bowed toward his chest. His arms were bent at the elbow, palms against each other as if he had fallen asleep saying prayers. Either that, or holding the gun, which lay on the floor a few inches from his fingers like a book dropped from his sleeping hands.

I had an idea: pick up the gun. Shoot him in the head. At this point he was already mostly dead anyway. I could just call the police in the morning and have Eliot explain how we had heard the gunshot in the middle of the night. How Pop had been suicidal for years. Sick in the head for months now.

I knew I wasn’t going to do it.

But that didn’t mean I wasn’t going to do it.

Because I could have done it without knowing I was going to.

I picked up the gun.

I hadn't held it since summer afternoon when Pop took me outside and taught me to shoot whiskey bottles in the backyard, but my fingers seemed to remember what to do. Two hands. Right thumb nestled in the left: arms hard and ready for the recoil. A finger curled around the trigger. Muzzle aimed at his forehead, I shut my eyes in case the shells flew back. *Don't think*, Pop had said. *See*. See what? *See yourself*. And for an instant I saw myself as I might have appeared to Pop if he had opened his eye and seen me pointing the gun at him: A Bad Dream.

I opened my eyes.

Nothing had changed.

Everything was still there.

Birds were singing. I could see the dark light of dawn gathering against the window-glass.

How long had I been up there?

I set the gun back down on the floor, watching him. Watching him, I took a light step back toward the ladder and started slowly down.

Halfway down, I heard him waking up. A rapid burst of panting breaths, as if he were running away from the Monster, and then he was awake and roaring a word that sounded like: Ngaroway. Then silence. He coughed a few times.

"Eliot?"

I held still in the dark.

"Eliot, you there?"

His voice sounded burnt.

"Eliot. Eliot! Where are you?"

I heard him sitting up in bed. He took a long deep breath and breathed out the Om sound. "OK," he said to himself. "You're OK." Then he began coughing again. And again. He couldn't seem to stop. I listened to him for about half a minute before I recognized that he was fighting back tears. And then he was surrendering—sobbing like a lost child.

I felt sad for him. But what could I do? He wasn't asking for me.

I stepped down the ladder.

In the bedroom Eliot was wide awake again, sitting on the blankets with his legs-crossed and his eyes on the screen, where Pilate was questioning Jesus. He looked at me. His eyes said: Pop? I nodded. He sighed heavily and paused the movie. I started to tell him what happened, but he was already standing up to go. "It's all right. He gets scared at night," he explained.

After he was gone, I turned the movie back on and fell asleep.

I dreamt that I was leaning over the edge of the black hole looking down at the dark. Pop was stuck down there. He needed my help. I wanted to help him. I opened my mouth to tell him I was there, but the words weren't there. Instead, a long serpent fell down into the dark like a rope. I felt Pop tugging at the end of the rope. And then he pulled at it—and I fell headfirst into the dark.

I slept for a long time. I awakened to the sound of laughter from above. It was Pop. And Eliot. In the watchtower, it sounded like. I heard them talking back and forth. I went out to the hall and listened, standing like a spy at the bottom of the ladder. Pop was speaking now. His tone was patient and paternal. So much gentler than the gun-toting apocalyptic madman from the night before that I wondered for a moment if the entire episode on the porch might have been a badly misremembered nightmare. Now and then Eliot would break in and out with an affirmative hum or an interrogative objection. A back and forth exchange would follow. And then Pop would take command again. I couldn't make out most of the words, I wasn't trying to, but I recognized the slow and searching rhythm of their voices—the up and down interplay between them—like an old lullaby that I had known since before I was born.

He used to talk to me like that, when I was little. At night after telling me a bedtime story he would turn off the lamp and lay on his back in the blankets, gazing up at the galaxy of glow-in-the-dark stickers of stars and planets and spaceships we had stuck to the ceiling together, and ask me philosophy questions until I fell asleep. What was time? Where did the world come from? What happened to us after we died? He always asked as if he really wanted to know what I thought, as if he really believed—he *did* believe—that I knew better than he did. He believed in me. And so I always had an answer for him. If I didn't know, I invented. In response to his abstract questions, I gave him concrete images—the first images that came to my imagining mind: Time was an ocean. The world was born from the egg of a dinosaur. After we die, our souls fly up to the moon. He treated every one of my visions like a precious gift: the cryptic revelations of a sun-dazed prophet stumbling down from a mountaintop encounter with the gods.

I started up the stairs. They stopped talking. Reaching the top of the stairs I saw them sitting on opposite ends of the mattress leaning their backs against the wall

beneath the window and staring at me as if I were a performer walking out on stage to do a trick for them. A stack of pancakes was on the table in front of them. Pop had a plate on his lap. He was eating a pancake with the blade of his pocketknife. The gun was on the floor in front of his feet.

I said a soft hello.

Pop nodded without taking his one eye off me. "Speak of the Devil," he said. "Sleep good?"

"Not really," I said.

"Bad dreams?"

"Yeah."

"Good," he said. "The bad sleep well. You ever hear that saying?"

"That's the name of a movie," said Eliot.

"No shit? I thought I made it up."

"Kurosawa movie."

"Well, Kurosawa stole it from me."

"It's from like 1960, Pop."

"People always stealing shit from me. Hey? You know why the bad sleep well?"

"No," I said. "Why?"

"No conscience."

"Hmmm," said Eliot.

"Get it?"

"Yeah," I said.

"No," said Eliot.

"A bad guy hasn't got a conscience," said Pop. "He doesn't give a shit between right and wrong. So a bad guy sleeps *good*, see. Now a *good* guy—he thinks about that shit. Keeps him in nightmares. You have bad dreams—that means you're thinking about that shit. That ain't bad. That's *good*. Means your conscience is eating away at you. Means you must have maybe done something bad. You done something bad?"

"No," I said. "Not that I know of."

“Are you *thinking* about it doing something bad.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You sure?”

“No.”

“Hey.”

“What?”

“Have a seat.”

“I’m alright.”

“Sit down,” he said.

“I like to stand.”

“Sit the fuck down.”

He pointed at the sofa across from the bed. I backed up slow and sat down staring back at him.

He still had his phantom mask on. And I was glad that he did. I was afraid to see his entire face. I kept catching myself looking at the dark sink of scarred-up skin where his left eye used to be. His right eye did not seem to blink. It seemed simultaneously anxious and aloof, like the eye of a shark in a tank.

He looked bad. He was wearing this crusted-looking old bathrobe that was strapped at the waist and wide open at the collar, a dense mass of white hair masking a deep-sunken chest. His belly stuck out like a basketball. His legs were all bare flab and soft bones, as if he hadn’t walked on them in months. And his feet—his feet were all swollen and scabbed-up. I wanted to soak them in soap and water.

A few more seconds passed. Pop sat still watching me as if I were a dog or something that he was thinking about adopting from Eliot.

“He looks hungry,” he said.

“You hungry?” Eliot asked.

“I’m all right.”

“You want a pancake?”

“No thanks,” I said.

“Have a pancake,” said Pop.

“I’m fine.”

“Give the kid a fucking pancake, Eliot.”

Eliot picked up a pancake from the top of the stack with two fingers. He walked over and handed it to me like a sheet of paper—no plate. I took it in two hands. It tasted bitter.

“I forget,” Pop said to Eliot. “Was he mad at *me* or was I mad at him?”

“I told you, Pop. You were mad at *him*.”

“Last night?”

“Yeah.”

“Ah, I was just messing with him.”

“You were acting crazy.”

Pop turned to Eliot. “What was I doing?”

“You don’t remember?”

“Nah, I live in the moment,” said Pop.

“You were pointing your gun at him.”

“Ha! I was pointing my gun at you?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“He was scared,” said Eliot.

“Ah, I was just fucking around. You knew I was just fucking around, right?”

“I wasn’t sure,” I said.

“You were scared?”

“Sort of,” I said.

“You threatened to shoot him,” Eliot said.

“I wasn’t going to shoot him.”

“You said he looked like a rat.”

“He *does* look like a rat.”

“Pop,” said Eliot.

“What?”

“You told me you’re going to be nice today.”

“What’s the fuck’s wrong with looking like a rat?”

“Pop,” said Eliot. “Are you going to be nice?”

“A rat’s a beautiful animal.”

“Be nice.”

“I am nice.”

“Tell him what you said before,” said Eliot.

“I don’t know what the fuck I said.”

“He said he was sorry.”

“Oh yeah,” said Pop.

“*Tell* him.”

“Sorry, Son.”

“It’s all right,” I said.

“He really is sorry,” said Eliot.

“*He* knows,” Pop said.

“Really,” said Eliot. “He was just talking about how bad he felt.”

“I don’t know what the hell got into me last night.”

“It’s OK,” I said. “You don’t need to apologize.”

“I just go a little crazy sometimes.”

“We all go a little crazy sometimes,” said Eliot.

“Eliot?” said Pop.

“What?”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“I was just—what did I say?”

“Stop acting like a fucking social worker.”

“I just want you two to get along again,” said Eliot.

“We are getting along. Aren’t we?” He leaned forward and held his hand out to me. “Hey? No hard feelings?”

“No,” I said, shaking his hand. His skin felt like wet sand.

“You forgive me?”

“Yeah.”

“Hey.”

“What?”

“I love you, Son.”

“I know,” I said.

“You’re my little boy,” he said. “I’m your dad. You know that? I was there when you were born. Remember being born?”

“No, Pop.”

“You were crying.”

“I know.”

“Crying like a baby.”

“He *was* a baby,” said Eliot.

“Babies are *smart*,” said Pop. “A baby knows where it’s at. You ever look at a baby? Babies and animals, man. Look an animal in the eye. An animal ain’t thinking about about good or bad. An animal just *is*. Just like the universe. Just like the universe.” He was looking out the window. “Just like the universe,” he said for a third time, and I could tell that the words—the repetition of them—were blazing a maze of connections in his mind, leading him back in time and through the dark to the spinning point of light in the center. “Hey!” he said. “Remember in the beginning, when God first made the universe? In the Bible? You remember the first thing God saw as soon as he made the world? I’ll tell you what God saw. He saw that *it was good*. Get it?”

He was looking at me in the same way Eliot had looked at me the night before.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“No,” said Eliot.

“He didn’t make the world good,” Pop said. “He just made the world. And then He was like: *Look! It’s good!* That was the one time—the one time in the history of the world—that God was ever surprised. He couldn’t understand it.” He looked out the

window for a long moment, gathering momentum. “See, God was sick back then. That’s what no one ever talks about nowadays. He’s fine *now*. But before? *Before* God made the universe, he was sick as hell. Sick in the *head*,” he said, pressing his index finger against the center hard of his forehead. “Depressed. Hell, you’d be depressed too, if you were in the dark all by yourself for your whole fucking life. No light. No one to talk to. Nothing to look at except your own mind—that’s a fucking ancient recipe for suicide. Course, God knew that. He wasn’t stupid. He was smart. Too smart for his own good if you ask me. Because he knew that he didn’t *have* to be so fucking sad. He *could* be happy. He knew exactly how to *make* himself happy. All he had to do was do what he was meant to do. What was he meant to do?”

“To create,” said Eliot.

“Exactly,” said Pop. “See, God was a natural-born Creator. That was his destiny ever since he could remember. And he could remember everything that ever happened—all the way back to the beginning of the line, which was also the end. Ever since the beginning end God’s one desire was to grow up and create the universe. *This* universe. Right here. And he knew exactly how to do it. He had the blueprints in his mind all along. All he had to do was do it. Will it into existence. Just an act of will—that was all it took. Just say the word and the world will exist and all the pain inside will go away. Poof!” He paused. “But He didn’t do it. He didn’t say the word that would make the pain go away. Not for a long time. You know why?”

“He couldn’t remember it?” Eliot guessed.

“No, no. He remembered everything.”

“He was too sad to speak?”

“No. Closer though.”

Pop was waiting for me to say it. I knew that he knew that I knew.

“He knew,” I said.

“What did He know?”

“That it was selfish,” I said.

Pop nodded, and I felt an unexpected bloom of tenderness for him.

“Wait,” said Eliot. “Why was it selfish?”

“Because the pain was going to spread,” I said.

“Through everything,” said Pop, turning toward Eliot. “See, God knew what was going to happen if he made the world the way he wanted to, the way it was in his mind. He’d thought through everything. Every permutation. He tried to make a perfect world—a world without pain. It didn’t work. Because it wasn’t real. Because the bad feeling was still *inside* him. If he was going to make the world real, then he had to let the pain in. No way to avoid it. Only way to avoid it was to *not* do it. So that’s what He tried to do. He tried not to make the world, even though he wanted to. Tried to take all the suffering on by himself. Just rolled all of his pain up into a tiny point and pushed it all the way down into the abyss at the bottom of his mind.”

His voice slid a little at the word *abyss*, like he was slipping toward tears. Leaning back, he tapped his fist a few times against his chest and lifted his eye to the heavenly ceiling, as if saying to God: I see you. “*Imagine* that, man,” he said, skipping the direction of his gaze past me—there was a shot of hard eye contact between us, full of a meaning I couldn’t translate—and back to Eliot, who seemed as spellbound now as he had seemed when he was telling the story about the bad God. “Imagine you’re God. Just try to. Imagine how hard that must have been—holding a whole universe of pain inside your head. Knowing that all you have to do to stop the pain is to say the words you were meant to say. Knowing that in time you’re *going* to say the words, no matter how hard you try not to. Just a matter of time before it happens. You can’t hold it inside forever. Sooner or later you’re going to have to surrender. That’s the whole reason you’re even there to begin with.”

He sniffled back the sound of tears, wiping his eye with the arm of his bathrobe and shaking his swallowing head. All of this seemed sincere for a moment. Next moment, he turned back to Eliot and said, “Give me your arm, Goat.”

“For what?” Eliot asked.

“I want to make a point.”

Eliot held his arm out for him.

Pop took Eliot's wrist in his right hand, holding tight. In his other hand, he was holding the pocketknife like a pencil. "Hold still," he said, and in the instant before I saw what was about to happen, he lifted the hand that held the knife and delicately, like a doctor slipping the needle through the skin, slid the blade in a swift line across the center of Eliot's palm. Not deep, but deep enough to draw out a dot of dripping blood and a high-pitched scream of surprised pain that sounded—I remember it sounding—weirdly devoid of anger. "What the *fuck*?" Eliot said, but his tone was more bemused than accusing, as if he already trusted Pop had a perfectly good explanation. He drew his hand back and bandaged the bleeding edge with the bottom of his shirt, waiting for Pop to go on.

"See," Pop said, "That sound you just made? That's it. That's what I'm talking about. That's how God made the world. He screamed it. Just the same way you screamed now. Because you couldn't help it. Because it fucking hurt. That's what the world *was*, man. A howl of helpless pain. *Let there be light.*"

Looking down, as if ashamed, Pop knocked his knuckles gently against the side of his head and said it a second time—this time in a whispered burst that stressed the last word like a question ("Let there be *light*?"), making the statement sound less like a heavenly command and more like a self-admonishing curse released in frustration, like he was reminding himself of some head-slappingly obvious truth that he had known from the beginning but dumbly forgotten, and tentatively granting his fallible mind forgiveness for this mistake on the condition that he promised not to do it again from now on.

He was shaking his head now. He stared down at the floor for another while before he crossed his legs, leaning upright against the window in the Om position. Om, I thought, but I was still scared. Because I sensed what was coming. He drew in a long and deep breath that seemed to take in the whole room, making him seem bigger and bigger, and then he spread his arms all the way out in opposite directions like a gliding bird, and he roared the words out one at a time ("LET...THERE...BE... LIGHT!") from the bottom of the top of his lungs: a

tremulous drumroll of rattlesnake thunder that seemed to come from everywhere at once, shaking the house like an earthquake, and seemed that way—it seems to me now—because it actually did.

Afterward he brought his arms back and gave himself a loving embrace, rocking back and forth on the bed with his head down and eye closed. Then he bowed his head forward and began to look like he was praying. After a moment, Eliot did the same. I watched, divided between a desire to laugh out loud and to bow my head and join them. Either act would have felt false. And the act of watching them started to seem intrusive. So I turned left and looked out the western window, which was open like a door and wide enough to walk through if I wanted to fall. The sun was somewhere I couldn't see. But I could see the light fading through the sky. It was already evening out.

At this point something happened.

A black bird flew diving through the window. It circled through the room, knowing exactly where it was and what it there for, before alighting upright on the floor in front of the mattress facing Eliot and Pop. Its head tilted up toward their faces. I couldn't see its eyes, but its gaze seemed lovingly attentive and mildly approving, as if it were evaluating whatever exactly it was that Pop and Eliot were doing and finding their performance—all in all—good enough.

Then the bird flew back out the window. No one else had seen it.

As soon as the bird was gone Pop began to raise his head. His eye blinked open and closed and open again. Next to him Eliot was still bowed in a ball of silent prayer, his arms wrapped around his knees and his hair falling over his eyes. He might have stayed in that position for the rest of the night if Pop hadn't slapped him across the back of the head with an open palm. "And there was light," Pop said as Eliot awakened. "Just like that. Whoosh! Like an explosion, speeding and spreading through everything all at once, out and out and out from one end of the line to the other. So bright that God had to close His eye before He could even look and see what He'd done. And even when he finally *did* lift his eye and open and take a good

look at the light? He still couldn't see it at first. Everything was still a blur at first. Because he still didn't know how to look at it. Because he was still seeing everything the same way he did in the dark. Seeing with his *conscience*. Thinking how wrong it was, what he had done. Thinking everything was wrong. But it wasn't wrong. And it wasn't right either. It just was. *That's* what God saw, when his eye finally adjusted to the light. He saw that *it was good*. Everything was. Even if it was bad, it was still good. Because he loved it. See? That's all there to it. Just love."

He laughed. Then Eliot laughed. One laugh seemed spontaneous and the other seemed forced, but I wasn't sure which was which.

"Pop," said Eliot, "tell him what you said before."

"Shit, I don't know what I said."

"You said—"

"Just words, man."

"Pop says everything is perfect."

"*If* you love it," Pop added, nodding.

"You think that's true?" Eliot asked.

There was a silence. I was waiting for Pop to answer. His eye flicked over to me.

"He's asking *you*," Pop said.

"You think everything's perfect?"

"I think—it's possible to see it that way," I said.

"I don't get it," Eliot said. "What about all the bad shit that happens?"

"Like what?" Pop asked.

"Like torture and shit."

"Listen," Pop said. "Look at my hand."

He held his right palm out in front of his face with his fingers wide open.

"You looking at it?"

"I'm looking," Eliot said.

"You love that hand?"

"Yeah."

“Say the words.”

“I love that hand.”

“Alright,” said Pop. “Hold still.”

And then he wound his arm back and smacked Eliot hard across the side of his face.

Eliot seemed to scream and laugh at the same time. His nose was streaming blood.

“You understand?” Pop asked.

“Mmm-hmm.”

He punched Eliot again—in the arm this time. “You see what I’m saying?” he asked, his eye on me. “Listen. If I beat you with my hand and you love my hand, then what the hell am I doing? I’m making a fool of myself. Aren’t I? Old JC said it himself. Turn the other cheek. It’s a simple thing. It’s heaven right here, Man. Heaven right here on earth.”

Eliot nodded, pinching his nose with the collar of his pajama shirt.

“What happens if you don’t love it?” he asked.

“Then you’re stuck inside the cage,” said Pop.

“Thinking about the walls?”

“Know what?” said Pop.

Eliot said, “What?”

“The way out of the cage is not through the door. Write that down.”

“I don’t know how to write.”

“Not on paper, Goat. Write it down in your *mind*.”

“The way out of the cage is not through the door,” said Eliot.

“Because the door just leads you to a bigger cage,” he said. “And then you go to another cage. All right. And that one leads to *another* cage. And you’re still stuck inside your *mind*. See. That’s not the way out, man. The way out is to be *willing*.”

Eliot was nodding along with his eyes wide open like one of those bobble-head toys. It annoyed me—how dumb he looked.

“Willing to do what?” I asked.

“To give it all up,” said Eliot.

“And accept it all as being perfect,” said Pop. “Same as God did after he made the world. Are you willing to give it all up?”

“I am,” said Eliot.

“What about you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes or no.”

“I don’t understand the question,” I said.

“Are. You. Willing?”

“To give it all up,” Eliot added.

“Give *what* up?”

“*It*,” said Pop.

“All of it,” said Eliot.

“But what is *it*?” I asked.

“Shit, man,” said Pop. “If you have to *ask* what it is, you’re never going to know.” He grinned under his mask, glancing sideways at Eliot. “You see what I mean about him? He questions everything. That’s all this kid knows how to do anymore is question. He doesn’t know how to just *be*.” Lifting his palms to his face, he leaned forward in a posture of hopeless frustration. A moment passed. And then another. He lowered his hands and sat straight with his legs crossed. A sense of contemplative calm seemed to have come over him. “Listen, man,” he said, his voice probingly gentle. “I get it. I do. I been where you are. Everyone has. Even God was there for a while. It’s a bad place to be. Because it’s isn’t a place. It’s nowhere. No-man’s land. And there’s no way out. And you *know* that. That’s the problem. You *know* it. If only you could go back to *not* knowing, like when you were a little boy. Wouldn’t that be nice? But no. It’s too late for that. You’re too far out. No turning back now. Hell, even if you did turn back you wouldn’t even know how to get back to where you were any more than you know how to get where you’re trying to go. Because you

don't know where the hell *there* is. All you know is it's somewhere else. Somewhere better than this. So you think about it. You and your big old blind brain, thinking. You think: Where am I going? Is this it? Is that it? You think if you just think hard and deep enough you're going to find it. Well...Hey? That's all right. Nothing to be ashamed of. That's what most people do. You're just like the rest of them. Just like the rest of them. I'm not judging. Just saying: I been where you are. And I've been where you want to go. I've been past it. And I'm back here to tell you: You can't get there from here, son. Understand? Whatever you think *it* is—that's not it. Because it's not something you *can* think. It's not something you can even imagine thinking unless you *see* it for yourself. So don't ask me what *it* is. I can't tell you. No one can. Not in words anyway." He smiled and cocked his head. "But what I *can* do—I can *try* to show it to you. Now that doesn't mean you're going to *see* it. I can't open your eyes for you. That part's up to you. All I can do is try to show you where to look for it. You want me to do that? Huh? It's up to you. You want to me to show you what it is?"

It was nothing.

He was just making it up as he went along.

I already knew that. So did Pop probably. Or maybe not. Maybe he was so far gone that he believed in his own bullshit. I wasn't sure which. And I wasn't sure which was worse.

Either way it offended me. Not so much the content of what he was saying, but the sanctimonious way he'd said it. He spoke with a kind of narcotic conviction that called to mind images of faceless cult leaders and suicidal martyrs. He didn't seem to be talking to me personally. I listened in vain for a single specifically personal detail, finding only horoscopic generalizations that might have applied to anyone. After all, what had he even really said? That human beings don't feel at home in the world? That we long for a meaning we can't seem to find? Everyone already knew that.

No, all he had really said was that *he* knew the Truth and I didn't. But *he* didn't. And I knew that. Because no one in possession of the actual Truth would ever talk the way he was talking.

I wanted him to see that.

So I said: "Yes."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

I said the word as if I were calling his bluff. And it was a bluff. I had no doubt about that. But I was already regretting calling him out on it. I was playing right into his hands. He had baited me into feeling defensive. Knowing better I had taken the bait. And now I was caught again—I had caught myself, as I always did in the presence of Pop—in another snare of self-consciousness: thinking about what I was thinking, and thinking about not thinking, and thinking that every single thought was all wrong.

"All right," Pop said. "But you might not like what you're going to see."

I waited for Pop to go on. But he said nothing. Outside it was getting darker than it should have been. In the windows it was almost night out. I was looking around the room for a light to turn on. No lights, said Pop. Or perhaps I imagined him saying that. He was sitting still and silent as the rest of the room: a shape framed against the fading light—darker than the darkness outside and therefore more visible than everything else. Looking at Eliot he pointed a finger down and across the room at a row of three candles that were standing on the sill of the open window that the bird—if the bird was real—had flown in and out of. Without words he ordered Eliot to light the candles. Eliot went to the window. He picked up the candles one at a time. There were three of them: one for each of us, each its own color inside identical jars of glass.

He set the candles down at equidistant points on the floor: one in front of the chair where I was sitting and the other two in front of the mattress, making a triangle that seemed to point at me. Kneeling in front of my candle, he drew a pack of matches from his back pocket. He struck a match. A flame went flaring up in the orange dark for a moment—and then died in a swell of sighing wind from the window. So did the next one. And the next. And the next, as if the wind were deliberately toying with him. He kept making the same mistake, holding the face of the match *up* to the rising wind when he should have tilted it down and protected the flame with his free hand. Then he began to make a different mistake, lowering the lit match *down* at the wick at the bottom of the glass jar (until the flame trickled up and burned his fingertips) when he should have tried turning the jar upside down in one hand and lifting the flame up to the wick with the other. Yet Pop did not coach or correct him. And Eliot seemed untroubled. And something about the spectacle—the hypnotic repetition of it—seemed to settle me down and calm my nerves. So that when he finally did succeed in lighting the candles, and sat back down in his place

next to Pop, I felt a plunge of disappointment, as if I were being dragged from the sea of a dreamless sleep.

Here I was again. And there were Pop and Eliot. A candle set in front of each of us. Everything was all set up...for what? I was trying not to guess. I might have guessed that Pop was going to start speaking in tongues or leading some kind of satanic séance. Or maybe he was setting the mood to tell a spooky ghost story like the ones he used to tell me at this time of year when I was a kid. I was secretly hoping for something like that. Because that would have granted me final permission to stop taking everything so seriously.

But that was not what happened. Nothing happened for another minute or two. Pop was gazing down at the flame in front of him—his face a floating mask in the candlelight. He looked to me like he was in a trance. I must have looked the same to Eliot. He was looking at me like I was lost.

He said, "You look sick."

"I'm all right," I said.

"Are you feeling it?"

"Feeling what?"

"The pancake."

"The what?"

"There was pot in the pancake," Eliot said.

"Marijuana," said Pop.

"Pot. You didn't taste it?"

"No," I said.

"You feel different?"

"No," I said, closing my eyes to make sure. No. I really felt no different than I had a moment ago. But a moment ago I had already felt a lot different than I had when I first ate the pancake. And so the revelation that there was pot in the pancake (if there really was; I wasn't really sure) calmed me down for a moment. Because it gave me an empirical explanation for the strangely doubled sense of distance I was

feeling from everything: the sense that one half of my mind was watching the other half from the dark of a distant tower. Yet this explanation, once I explained it to myself, only intensified the sense of certainty that I was neither one or the other—the watcher or the watched. I was starting to feel as if I wasn't there.

“Here,” I heard Eliot say.

I opened my eyes. And there was the shotgun. He was holding the gun out to me in two upturned hands like an offering: the muzzle in one palm, the barrel in the other. “Pop wants you to hold this,” he said. I shook my head no. “Take it,” said Pop. I pushed the barrel away. But Eliot was already stepping back and letting go of it. And out of some blind instinct I held on to the barrel to make sure it didn't fall. Now I was holding the gun. Against my will at first—and then with a sense of relief. Better me than Pop. Just breathe. Breathing, I placed the gun down on my lap.

“Go ahead,” said Pop. “Shoot me.”

I said, “What's going on?”

“You don't want to?”

“Shoot you?”

“Yes.”

“No,” I said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I said, and seemed to mean it. But then the memory of what I'd done the night before—of climbing up the ladder to the watchtower and pointing the gun at Pop's sleeping head—returned to me like an image from a forgotten dream. I saw this image from outside: Not through the eyes of the person who had pointed the gun, but from the floating point of view of someone watching, without judgment, through the dark window. It wasn't me who'd done that. It couldn't have been. I felt certain of that. Yet I had done it—I was certain of that too. Something was wrong with me.

“Let me ask you a question,” he said. “You love me?”

I thought about it for more than a moment. “Yes.”

“Can you say it?”

“I just did.”

“Say the words.”

“I love you.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Would you ever do anything to hurt me?”

“No,” I said.

“No?”

“Not deliberately.”

After a silence, Pop said: “What do you think, Goat? You believe him?”

“I do,” Eliot said. “I don’t know if he believes *himself*, though.”

“Hmmmmmm,” Pop said, a hum of melodramatically drawn-out skepticism. He looked down at his lap and touched his fingertips together, making it look like he was holding some kind of glowing crystal ball in his hands, and then, as if he had seen something that decided everything, he dead-set his eye on me. “Alright then. I believe you, Fishface.”

Fishface? He had never called me that before, as far as I recalled. I thought for a moment that he must be talking to Eliot. But no. He was looking straight at me, as if it were an old nickname—maybe it was—that he’d been using all my life.

“Just one question,” he said. “You love me so much, let me ask you one question.” He paused just long enough for me to anticipate what it was: “Why the hell are you plotting to steal my money? Huh? What’s that about?”

I looked at Eliot. “I told him,” he said.

“Of *course* he told me.”

“I felt bad,” said Eliot.

Pop tapped his index finger at the side of his forehead. “Conscience,” he said.

“Don’t worry,” Eliot said. “He’s not mad.”

“I’m not mad, I’m *hurt*.”

“Pop,” I said. “I really—”

“Is that the reason you came here?”

“No,” I said.

“To steal my money?”

“No,” I said. “That was just—”

“Because that’s pretty fucking bad.”

“Honestly, I wasn’t really going to do it,” I said.

“Shit, man. I would have *given* it to you if you asked. You want it?”

“No.”

“Take it.”

“Pop, I don’t—”

“Eliot, give the kid his fucking cash.”

Without taking his eye off me, Pop pointed to the safe in the corner of the room. Eliot picked up his candle and walked there. He went down on his side opened the lock. He reached inside the safe and came out with a black garbage bag. He handed the bag to me. “Take a look,” said Pop. “It’s all there.”

I lifted the candle and looked inside expecting to see something else. But it was just a mess of dollar bills floating around all wrinkled up and random like dirty socks at the bottom of a laundry basket. Sitting back down in his place, Eliot winked a winning grin at me like: *See?*

I wanted suddenly to punch him again—in his other eye this time. Not the way I had wanted to the night before. I had punched him the night before mostly because I wanted to prove to myself I could. Now I wanted to punch him for his own good. To snap him out of whatever demonic spell Pop seemed to have cast over his mind.

“You’re welcome,” Pop said.

“I don’t want this,” I said.

“Take it.”

“Thank you,” said Eliot.

“Pop,” I said. “I wasn’t going to—”

“STOP it,” said Pop. “Just stop it.”

“No excuses,” Eliot said. “Right, Pop?”

“Damn straight,” said Pop. “See, Goat gets it. That’s why he’s the Greatest of All Time. You? Your whole *life* is an excuse. That’s why you’re the fish. Forever In Searcha Home. Look at him: Swimming around in that little fishbowl brain of his. He doesn’t even know where the hell he is.”

He laughed.

I said, “I don’t know what to say.”

“Of course you don’t.”

“Just say you’re sorry,” said Eliot.

“There’s an idea.”

“You sorry?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” I said, but I might have meant to say no. But if I said no I might have meant yes. So whatever. It was all just words.

“He really is hurt,” Eliot said.

“Fucking *devastated*,” said Pop, but he didn’t sound like he was yet. “Here I am thinking you came out here to say goodbye to your poor old dying dad. Thinking who knows? Maybe he doesn’t hate me anymore. Maybe he forgives me for whatever the fuck it is he thinks I did to him. Hell, maybe he stays here for a while. Maybe we can have a few more good old times like we used to do. Drink some whiskey. Play some music. Talk about God and shit. Man, you should have seen how fucking *amped* I was when you said you were coming here. How *amped* was I, Goat?”

“I had to give him a couple Xanax to calm him down,” said Eliot, nodding at me with eyebrows raised.

“Tell him what I said.”

“When?”

“When I got off the phone with him the other night.”

“Oh yeah,” said Eliot. “He said he couldn’t remember ever being happier in his whole entire life.”

“I couldn’t. But then I remembered the *other* times I felt that kind of happy.”

“When he was a little boy,” Eliot said. “Right?”

“Uh-huh,” said Pop. “*Long* time ago.”

“Pop says you were the most beautiful kid of all time.”

“You were,” said Pop. “Man, I couldn’t walk through the fucking A&P without like twelve people following me around telling me how gorgeous you were. What an *angel*. That’s what everyone said. I was like: Fuck that. This kid’s way better than an angel.”

He sniffled a few times. I wasn’t sure if he was trying to really cry, or trying to stop himself from really crying. Eliot handed him a box of Kleenex. He crushed a tissue in his fist. Looking down, he began to speak in a more methodical tone.

“What the fuck *happened* to you, man? Huh? What’d I ever do to you to make you hate me so much? What’d I ever do to you except love you to *death*. And take care of you. And protect you. Held you in my arms. Without me, what the fuck are you? You’re nothing. You wouldn’t even exist without me. I *made* you, man. I *invented* you. And what do you to repay me? Huh? I’ll tell you what you do. Let me play the tape back for you—from *my* point of view. You want to talk about point of view, here’s mine: You fucking ignore me. *That’s* what you do. You act like I don’t exist. You spend more time talking to the imaginary God in your head than your own fucking dad. Seven years, not even a phone call. Not even a birthday card, much less a visit. And then? When I call you on the phone and tell you I’ve got a tumor the size of a hand in my head, do you cry? Do you even feel sad for me? Do you even *pretend* to feel sad? Nope. You don’t even *believe* me, sounds like. Did he believe me, Eliot? You tell me?”

“He was skeptical,” said Eliot.

“Oh, I see. Skeptical.” He was staring into the middle distance, as if seeing the word spelled out in cloud-letters through the air—SKEPTICAL—and reading it

from all different angles. “Hmmm. Well. My bad. See, for some reason I thought you were a man of *faith*? I thought you were all about doing what Jesus did? Must have had that wrong, I don’t know. I guess maybe your kind of faith doesn’t apply so much to people who actually exist in the real world. Maybe faith is just for imaginary stuff? Stuff you can’t see? Is that it? Because that’s what it sounds like—from *my* perspective. Sounds like you were plotting against me the moment you came here. Weren’t you? Hey? Don’t deny it. Goat told me everything. How you tried to *influence* him, like he was some puppet you could program to do your bidding. I hear you made him sign some kind of invisible-ink contract, huh? That right? Made him promise to do exactly what you told him to? And then, just to make sure he knew who the Boss was, you *punch* him in the face. Gave the poor kid a black eye. And that *still* wasn’t enough for you. Because *then* you start in with the God talk. Trying to brainwash him into worshipping that fucking psychopathic monster of a God of yours. Right? The Christian God? From the Bible? Yahweh? Is that what you call him? The one who makes the earthquakes and the cancer? The child-killer? That’s your God, right?

“Hey, I get it. I do. I see why *you* want to worship a monster. Same reason all you god-headed sons of bitches do it. Makes you look better. It’s the ultimate excuse: If you’re made in the image of a Monstrous God, then you get a free pass to go ahead and act like a monster too. Makes sense. I get it. I’m not judging. Just saying. You do you, Fishface. You want to hand your freedom over to a Monster, go right ahead. But hey? How about maybe you leave the Goat out of it? Huh? He’s still a kid, man. Look at him. He’s good. He’s still got the animal Light in his eyes. Last thing he needs in his mind right now is some double-talking demon telling him bad is good and good is bad.”

He threw the tissue at me.

“No, no, let me finish,” he said, though I wasn’t even about to speak up—I was still trying to understand what exactly was going on. Was he serious? Seriously serious? He couldn’t have been. It was another one of his tests, like the Phantom act

at the bus station and the mad gatekeeper dialogue at the door of the house the night before: the endgame of an elaborate obstacle-course that he—or maybe the real mastermind was Eliot—had staged in order to lead me to some kind of cathartic recognition of...what? I didn't know. Neither did Pop, I was pretty sure. Either way, I didn't know if the proper response to play along, or to defend myself. So I said nothing.

"Let me finish," he said again. "I didn't even tell *you* the best part yet." He turned to Eliot: "You want to hear the best part? Listen: You're not going to *believe* this shit. Last night? Last night at like four o'clock in the morning? When I was sleeping? This sneaky motherfucker right here"—he jabbed his index finger at me—"slithers up the ladder like fucking snake. Takes the gun out of my hands. Points it at me. At my *head*. Points that shit right at my fucking head and just *stands* there. Right where he is now: Stands right there pointing the gun at me like some fucking silent assassin. For like—a *long* time. Like an hour at least. Longest hour of my life. Man, I thought was a dead man. Thought he was the Angel of Death for a minute or two. Then after another minute I was like: Wait. No, that's no Angel of Death. That's my little boy. And that's when I started pleading for my life. I said to him—I said: Please, Son. Please just put the gun down. Don't do it. You don't want to do this. You don't know what you're doing. You're sick, I said. Just trust me. I'm your dad and I know what's best. And I love you more than the whole world."

He was really crying now, hanging his head and swallowing for air.

It was a good performance.

Eliot glanced at me as if to make sure I was still there. His eyes were full of sad concern—for both of us. He set his hand on the back of Pop's neck and asked:

"What happened next?"

"Nothing," said Pop.

"What did he say to you?"

"Nothing. He didn't say shit to me."

"Not even after you told him you loved him?"

“*Nothing*,” Pop said. “He just stood there. Just kept staring and *staring* at me with those dead eyes of his. Same way he always has—least ever since he stopped being a little boy. Same way he’s looking at me right now: Like I don’t exist.”

Eliot asked, “Then what happened? Did he hurt you?”

“I don’t...I don’t want to talk about it.”

“He needs to hear it from you, Pop.”

“He doesn’t care about me.”

“Did he shoot you?”

I said, “Wait a second.”

“Pop,” Eliot said, his palm rising at me: Silence. “Did he try to kill you?”

Pop nodded. “He did,” he said through a rush of tears. “He *shot* me.”

“Where did he shoot you?”

“Here,” tapping his chest with his fist.

“In the heart?”

“Where the feelings are,” Pop said, and then, as if on cue, he burst into a broken heap of screaming crying. It was hard to listen to. He wasn’t weeping so much as shouting out in pain. And the pain that was prompting the shouting seemed to stop and start and stop and start at regular intervals.

Eliot looked at me. “How could you?”

I tried to laugh. “Are you serious?”

“He’s your father. He loves you.”

“Eliot, hold on. Are you—?”

“Answer the question.”

“What question?”

“How could you do this to him?”

“I didn’t...What did I do?”

“You *shot* him.”

“No I didn’t.”

“In the *heart*,” Eliot said.

“Eliot, that doesn’t even make sense.”

“It makes a lot of sense. Look at him. He’s hurt.”

Pop was leaning his head against his arm, groaning so loudly that I had to raise my voice.

“Eliot,” I said. “It’s an act. He’s...lying.”

“You’re calling *me* a liar?” Pop shouted, punching the air. “You? Man, your whole *life* is a lie. You don’t even know who the fuck you are. You have no idea. You want to tell stories? Tell them to your bullshit God. Don’t bring that shit around here. I’m not going to take it from you. Not anymore. I’m done. I am so fucking done with your bullshit games.” He took a pillow from the bed and brought it to his mouth. And screamed. Then he lowered the pillow. Behind his mask his face seemed clear again. “Don’t listen to his double-talk, Eliot. I told you. He’s a snake. Fucking snake in the garden, man. That’s the whole-only reason he came here—to make chaos. To spread his pain to us. All he knows how to do anymore. And he knows it. He knows he’s evil. Look in his eyes, man. He’s trying to deny it, but deep down? At the bottom of everything? He knows what’s up. That’s why he can’t talk all the sudden. Because he has nothing to say. Nothing. Do you?”

No. I had nothing to say. And not for lack of trying. I was trying hard to make some kind of calculated sense of what was happening. Nothing was adding up. Even if I took everything Pop said at face value—as a twisted-up narrative of the events from the compromised point of view of madman with a real tumor in his brain and a really black hole of pain in his heart—I still had no idea how to engage either of them. Obviously, most of the details of his narrative were flat-out false. He wasn’t seeing me clearly. I wanted him to understand that. It was a question of how.

A part of me felt compelled to deliver a defensively dispassionate refutation enumerating the inconsistencies and contradictions of his narrative point by point, like a lawyer defending a slandered client. Another part of me—the more rational part—knew that there was no point. I had already tried to reason with Eliot. Pop was far past the point reasoned argument could reach. And he always had been. Even

back in the days when his mind was sound (which it might still have been even now), he harbored such a deep suspicion of empirical thought that he actually threatened to punish me if I earned any grade higher than a C in my high school science classes, as if he were possessively afraid that my mind might be colonized by an infection of blind faith in the Scientific Method. For Pop, reasoned evidence wasn't a route to any kind of objective truth. It was a tool that people used to distract themselves from their truer selves. So I knew better than to bother arguing with him about the facts, about what really happened.

A better approach was to engage him emotionally. To pitch *my* feelings in spoken sounds and words against his. To say what I might have felt inside. In some blind realm of my mind—the same placeless realm where I saw the flock of black birds and the faithful dog—I could envision a version of myself taking something like this approach. And not just one version: an infinite number, multiplying like mirror-house reflections. In one version I collapse into genuinely apologetic tears. In another I forgive Pop for everything while secretly hating him. In other the reverse. In another I laugh and laugh and laugh and I keep laughing until I starve to death. In another I let out an ecstatic howl of helpless pain, like the Pop-god giving birth to a tragically imperfect universe. In others I do all different things—with all different real feelings. Everything. I jump out the window feeling like I can fly. I pick up the gun and shoot myself in the head to feel alive. Or I shoot Pop in the eye because fuck him. Or I take a handful of cash from the garbage bag and eat it, because I fucking feel like it.

But I didn't do any of that. Because this version of me felt nothing.

So I said what I felt. "Nothing."

"Nothing," said Pop. Not a question—an echo. He felt it too.

"Nothing," I said. "I have nothing to say."

"You got to say *something*," Eliot said.

"Nothing's something," said Pop.

"It's not enough," said Eliot.

"Well," said Pop, "nothing's ever enough."

“He should apologize. Shouldn’t he, Pop?”

“Not unless he feels bad about it,” said Pop.

“Do you feel bad?” Eliot asked.

“No.”

“Not even a little bit?”

I shook my head. “Not right now.”

“Jesus,” said Eliot, seeming distantly impressed. “You really are evil.”

“I told you,” Pop said. “No conscience.”

“Don’t you feel *anything*?”

“No,” I said, but no: I *did* feel something now, or my flesh did.

I felt cold.

That was it: I was freezing cold.

It was not the room that was cold. It was me. It was a coldness that seemed to spread out from the center of some oceanic space within me—the space where Pop said I shot him—and break in hard waves of ice against the surface of my skin. I was shivering. Chattering teeth. Looking down, I drew the bagful of cash against me like a blanket.

“Look at you,” Pop said, “cradling your precious bag of cash like a baby. That’s all *you* care about. Isn’t it? Your precious *inheritance*. You can’t even wait for me to die. Man, I can see the dollar signs in your eyes. That’s all I am to you. Money, money, money. Well here it is. Your Big Chance to finally cash in your poor old Pop and make your bullshit movie-star dreams come true.” He laughed, shaking his head. “Like anyone would want to see your ugly face in a movie.”

There was a moment of silence.

“He could be in a horror movie,” Eliot said, as if he were offering me a diplomatic concession.

“True. If they ran out of monster masks.”

“Yeah,” said Eliot. “That’d be *perfect*.”

“Wouldn’t even need a mask. Just his face, hey?”

“No, but yeah. Listen: Because usually? In the movie the bad guy is usually always an *actor*. He’s not actually a bad person in real life. But if *he* was the bad guy,” he pointed at me, “then it wouldn’t be acting. He would be *actually* bad. It’d be good.”

“Interesting,” said Pop, nodding.

“I don’t think anyone’s ever done that before.”

“Well, listen. If you ever make a movie of this, just promise me you play yourself? Can you do that for me, Fishface?”

I said: “I...”

“Who would play me?” Eliot asked.

“Orson Welles,” Pop said, as if it were obvious.

“Cool. You’d be Mel Gibson,” Eliot said, nodding.

“The Man Without a Face,” said Pop, and then he laughed with a gently self-effacing warmth that seemed out of tune with the emotion of the moment, as if he were momentarily breaking character. I wanted to laugh too. At everything, but most of all at the demonic vision of me that they were seeing. It made no sense. None of it. I didn’t give a shit about money. I had never even wanted to make movies—that was Eliot’s thing. And Eliot looked nothing like Orson Welles. And Mel Gibson? What? It was all so absurd that it had to have been some elaborately collaborative practical joke they’d designed in advance for the sole purpose of making me feel like an object. Even the way that they were talking—the bantering back-and-forth about who’d play who in the movie—was starting to sound scripted and rehearsed. It was a performance. Of course it was. I was certain of this for a sudden moment.

But the certainty didn’t change anything. I was still just cold.

“Pop,” I said, “Is this a joke?”

Pop said, “*What?*” He looked at Eliot.

“He asked if this is all a joke,” Eliot said.

“This is a joke,” I said. “Isn’t it?”

Pop sighed. “See what I have to deal with?”

“This is not a joke,” said Eliot. “This is real life.”

“Man, he doesn’t know what *real* means,” said Pop. “Fucking hopeless. Look at him. Looking at me like I’m behind a screen. Hey! Hello? Earth to Fishface? I’m right here. I exist. I’m a real person. This isn’t another one of your fucking movies. This’s real life, right here. You hear me? Look at me when I’m talking to you. Don’t look at yourself. Look at me.”

“I am looking at you,” I said.

“No you’re not.”

“I am.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Are you your eyes?”

“What?”

“Are? You? Your? Eyes?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Your *eyes* are looking at me. Not you. I’m asking *you* to look at me.” He leaned forward, holding his chin in his palm. “Remember when you were a little boy? How you used to look at me? No?” A note of resignation had entered his voice. “Man,” he said, “you used to look at me like I was the whole entire world. Like I was everything in the world—and everything in the world was perfect because I was there.” He sighed. “And you were right. That’s the thing: You were right about me. I *was* the whole world. I *was* perfect. I still am. I’m right here. Right outside your eyes. I’ve been here all along. I never left you. I never changed. Nothing changes. Nothing real. Just you. You just forgot how to see me. Because you forgot how to see past yourself. You forgot how to love. And that’s OK. That’s how I planned it. You had to forget. So you could remember again. So you could come back home. Hey? That’s all I’m asking you to do. Just remember who I am. And you can’t do that unless you look at me.”

I looked at him. And there he was. He was looking back at me. Nothing had changed. I still felt the same nothing. But something was starting to seem different.

Not Pop—he still looked the same. It was everything else that was changing. Something in the inner space surrounding everything around him. Everything around him seemed darker. And closer. And closing in fast, as if his eye were the white point of blind light at the end of a narrowing tunnel that I was moving through without the motion of effort or desire. Without even a working body: just an empty mind suspended in a state of surrendering awareness. A whale inside a whale inside a whale inside a whale. Where?

“I want to go home,” I said.

Pop laughed. “Home?”

“Om,” I said. “H—”

“You can’t go *home*.”

“I think he said OM,” said Eliot.

“Did you say home or OM?”

“H—,” I said. “OM.”

“He’s trying to meditate,” said Eliot.

Something was spinning inside me. I was holding on to it.

“I’m going home,” I said, but I wasn’t. I wouldn’t have known where to go.

“Where’s home?” Pop asked.

“Where I live,” I said.

“Where’s that?”

I shut my eyes tight and thought: *Home*. I saw the word, but I couldn’t see what it was pointing to. Home was just home.

“Where’s home, Fishface.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“What? Fishface?”

“Why are you calling me that?”

“Because you’re the Fish.”

“Forever in search of home,” said Eliot.

I said: “That’s not my *name*.”

“It’s not?”

“No.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I thought that was your name.”

“Wait,” said Eliot. “What the hell *is* his name?”

I was trying to remember it. Nothing was coming. Not a single word or picture. Not even the start of a sound. Nothing. Just a starless darkness, as if all the power had gone out of the part of my brain where the sense of past and self were stored. And the darkness was spreading out and out. Through everything. “Listen, Fishface,” said Pop. “I’m going to let you in on a little secret. That thing you’re looking for? *It*? God? Your home, or whatever the fuck you’re calling it now? It’s not in the bowl. You can go ahead and keep swimming circles through your mind for the rest of your life—you’re not going find it. You hear me? You’re not. Because it’s not in there. If you want to get back home you’re going to have to take a *leap*. You’re going to have to leap *out* of the fishbowl. All right?”

I was taking deep breaths. Leaning down like I was going to throw up. Thinking: *I am going to die*. That was my last thought before I fell on the floor. I felt the floor falling out from under me.

“Fish out of water,” shouted Pop, laughing.

“Jesus,” said Eliot. “Is he all right?”

“He’s *fine*. This’s good for him.”

“Is he going to die?”

“Well, we’ll see. Depends what kind of fish he is. See, most fish can’t live on dry land. Some can...Some of the more metaphorical fishes can live a whole lifespan in the desert. Now this this one right here? Fishface? I don’t know about him. He looks to me like more of a literal type fish. You’ve seen the way his mind works...But hey. Never know. Sometimes a literal fish turns metaphorical at the last second—grows an immortal soul. Not often, but it happens.”

I felt numb.

And yet the numbness was agony.

It was like waking up in the dark of a room that you don't recognize. Like that brief seizure of amnesic panic that takes hold of your mind in the terrifying moment before consciousness returns to tell you who you are and what you're doing here. Imagine that moment going on and on and on. That was what it was like. I thought it wasn't going to end.

And then it began to end.

A flood of adrenaline light flashed through me.

I felt like myself again. Yet I no longer knew who I was.

A cold hand was touching my forehead. I opened my eyes and breathed back to life. Looking up, I saw Pop leaning over me like a doctor. “You’re all right,” he said. He held his hand out for me to hold on to. I sat up straight and leaned back against the wall. “You’re going to be fine,” he said. “Nothing to be afraid of. I wouldn’t ever hurt you. Not in real life. Course, this isn’t real life. This is just a dream.”

“A metaphor,” said Eliot.

“A story,” said Pop.

“A symbol.”

“Signs and symbols,” said Pop. “Everything you see out here’s just a sign and a symbol. Darkness and light? A body in space? A bullet in a gun? Symbols—all. For what? That’s the question. See, a symbol isn’t going to mean nothing less it stands for something real. Something that really *is*. If nothing’s real, then what the fuck’s a symbol stand for? Nothing. But nothing *isn’t* real. There *is* something. And that’s what I’m trying to show you. That’s all I’m doing here. Just making a little show for you. See?”

I nodded without thinking about it. Because it was all starting to make a calming kind of sense to me—a sense that transcended thought and set me free of time. It was all a story I was stuck inside of, a long dream I was falling awake from. Not just the story that I’m telling now: Everything. Everything I had ever seen and done since the beginning of time. All of existence: None of it was real. Not really. No more real than written words on a page, shapes on a flat screen.

I looked at Pop. He was kneeling a few feet away from me with back straight. Then he leaned his head down and began to stand, pushing the palms of his hand against the floor. I seemed to hear the secret of his bones crackling inside him like sticks snapping apart in a flame. He was weak. He must have taken a minute or two to get all the way up on his feet. On his feet he wobbled backed and forth like a child learning to walk, flailing his arms like wings, and just when I thought he might fold

and fall toppling over on me he caught the flat of his hand on the bannister above the ladder and balanced his hips against the railing. He stood stiffly relaxed, coughing into his fist a few hard times and breathing to catch his breath. His bathrobe was open.

I looked at the flame in front of me. Then I looked past the flame at Eliot. He sat on the mattress staring down. His eyes said nothing about what he was thinking. As if he were talking in his sleep, he said, “Do you want me to get the gun?”

Pop didn’t answer. He lifted his free hand to his face, clasping his fingers against his forehead. I felt a clenching inside because I thought he was going to take his mask off. But no—he was just holding his thinking head. He lowered his hand to his side and spat a spot of blood on the floor next to me.

Behind him I saw Eliot standing. He picked up the gun from the floor and brought it to Pop. Without looking at him Pop gripped the barrel of the gun in his free hand and pointed the pistoled end down against the floor like a cane. “All right,” he said. “Now listen. No time for talking. Time is for doing. Now’s the time you’re going to do what I say. You do what I say and I’m going to say it. I’m not going to say it if you’re not going to do it. You’re going to do what I say or not? No? Hey? Answer me.”

I heard myself saying yes.

He pointed the gun at the ladder. “Good. Then stand up. Go on. Down the steps.”

I said, “Where?”

“Where what?”

“Where are we going?”

“Down the steps, Fish. Move it.”

I stood. His eye was on mine. I climbed down the ladder watching my hands as if they belonged to someone else. When I was all the way down, I heard Eliot ask, “What do I do?”

I was standing in the hall and looking up the ladder. All I could see was the ceiling—the shadow of Pop’s head in the candlelight. “Ah yes,” he said, “the Goat. You need to do something else for me. Turn around. Close your eyes. Can you do that?”

I heard Eliot ask, “Why?”

“You’ll see. Go on.”

“OK,” said Eliot.

“Good. Now close your eyes,” said Pop.

“I am.”

“Picture something.”

“You mean—in my mind?”

“Your brain,” he said. “Take your time.”

“What do you want me to picture?”

“Whatever you want.”

“OK,” said Eliot.

“What do you see?”

“Flock of birds.”

“Black birds?”

“Yeah.”

“Good,” said Pop. “Now hold still. Hold those birds in your brain.”

In the ceiling I saw the shadow of the shotgun rising in his arms.

He was taking aim.

There was a hard shot of screaming sound. A blaze of blue and gold light.

Another shot and the screaming ceased. And then a sharply ringing silence.

Eliot was dead.

Pop had shot him in the back of the head.

Eliot was dead and Pop had shot him in the back of the head.

In the back of the head—and he was dead. He was not alive anymore.

I stood in the dark repeating this string of words in different orders until the reality of their meaning began to set in. Setting in, this meaning began to make the same kind of distantly metaphorical sense as everything else. Everything was a symbol of something I still couldn't see. And I was still seeing everything from inside out. And so the death of Eliot impacted me in something like the same way that I might have been impacted by the death of a fictional character in a novel I was so deeply absorbed in that I forgot I was reading it. I felt it...and then, as if setting the novel aside, I returned to the real world, where I found myself curiously indifferent. All the oceanic waves of initial feeling (the heart-burst of hollow shock, the hardening panic of penitential dread) were blotted out in the dark light of the recollection that none of it was real. None of it was really happening. It was all happening—at least this was how it seemed to me—in some parallel aesthetic dimension that I was watching and interpreting from outside. And from outside it all began to seem strangely beautiful.

I was looking up the ladder at the square opening of candlelit dark. After a while Pop leaned through the dark looking down at me. "Strange," he said. "Kid said he had a flock of fucking birds in his brain." He looked around the room. "Now I'm seeing his brains splattered all over the windows, but birds? I don't see birds up here. You see any birds down there?"

I shook my head no.

"Then what the fuck happened to the birds?"

He swept his gaze around as if checking one last time to make sure: No birds. He muttered a wordless sound of shrugging resignation. Then he turned around and set one foot down on the first rung of the ladder. He paused for a long time before he placed his next foot down. Another pause—then he went down another two steps and stopped again, gripping the top rung of the ladder in his right hand. In his other hand he held the gun against his chest. His head was still in the light above the opening. He stood for a long time in the straight and centered posture of a diver preparing to do a backflip off a high board. And then he pushed and let go, falling down and down at me.

I tried to move out of his way. At the same time I was also trying to catch him in my arms. And the result of these two antithetical instincts—to save him and to save myself—was that I couldn't seem to move. I just stood there watching him fall until the back of his head slammed against the front of mine. I fell backward. He fell on top of me. And we landed in a heap of tangled arms and legs on the floor.

I was out cold for a time.

I woke up pinned beneath his weight. His head was a hard rock pressed against my shoulder. He fell back on me when I tried to push him off. I gathered my strength and pushed harder. After a struggle I managed to roll out from under him and crawl on my hands and knees to sit back against the wall. I felt a pinpoint of stabbing pain in the space behind my eye. And my nose was bleeding. But I was all right.

As for Pop—I wasn't sure. He felt like dead weight, but I heard him breathing.

I reached back and switched the light on without standing up. In the light I saw how badly blurred my vision was. I wasn't seeing clearly. Or perhaps I was seeing clearly to an unclear reality. Everything I looked at seemed to slide out of focus in the moment I set my eyes on it. I saw the walls slithering up and down. Pop looked less like a person than like a liquid shadow spilled on the floor—a darkly rippling puddle of pulsing shapeless flesh. And beneath him the floor too seemed to pulse and ripple as if the hall were the inside of a snake that was breaking out of its skin.

I closed my eyes.

The darkness spun.

I must have fallen asleep.

I dreamt that it was all a bad dream.

I awakened expecting to find myself somewhere else.

But it was still the same dream. And all was still again—starting over.

Another morning. I heard the birds in the branches and the branches singing in the sound of moving wind. A light rain was beating a soft white noise against the walls of the house. In the hall there were no windows, but a square of dawning sunshine slanted down the ladder through the opening to the tower, framing Pop like

a searchlight in the shadows. In the light he lay with his bathrobe spread out like a cape and his arms stretched out like Christ. His mask was still on—the masked side of his face slumped against the floor. His eye flitted back and forth beneath the lid. He was sleeping. He knew nothing. Let him sleep on.

Go now, I thought.

But where would I have gone?

I was already here. And there was nothing for me out there. If I walked away I would begin to disappear. I would grow smaller and smaller with each step until no one could see me.

So I stayed where I was.

He was swimming awake. In a moment he would surface and see that I was still there. And then what would happen? I had no idea. And that was what drew me on. I wanted to see how it ended. Yet I no longer cared what the ending was. All that mattered was that I was there for it.

I was watching his face when his eye shot open; he gasped suddenly awake.

In a single motion he sat bolt upright and brought his hand to his cheek to make sure the mask was still on. His breathing was fast and shallow. He held his fingertips against the mask and stared straight ahead at the door at the end of the hall.

I set my hand on his shoulder.

He sprang back as if I had bitten him and took hold of my wrist. His grip was so hard that for a moment I felt a crush of bones. In that moment he turned to look at me. His eye was wide open—a black hole with nothing inside it. No light. And then the sight of me seemed to remind him where he was. “I was dreaming,” he said, his fingers loosing just enough for me to take my hand back. He clasped his hands behind his neck and looked down at the floor for a long time. His face twitched once and then he shook his head.

After a minute he asked me what had happened.

I said, “You shot Eliot.” The indifference in my voice surprised me.

He said, “Who?”

“Eliot. The goat.”

“I shot him?”

“He’s dead.”

“In the dream?”

“In real life,” I said.

“No, that was the dream.”

“No,” I said. “That was real.”

“In the *dream* it was real.” His tone was beseechingly certain.

“Okay,” I said. I saw no point in pressing him. He was better off believing in the dream. And I wasn’t sure he wasn’t right.

“Anyway,” he said, and then said nothing.

I said, “Anyway what?”

“Every one is two.”

“Oh.”

“No,” he coughed. “I mean it.”

“I know you do. I just don’t know what you mean.”

“When we’re asleep here,” he said, “we’re awake somewhere else.”

He looked up and down and around the hall like an animal casing the walls of its cage, without expectation. Finding no escape, he leaned back down on the floor with his arms folded over his chest and his eye open at the ceiling.

I said, “Pop, what are you doing?”

He said, “Hmmm?”

“Wake up.”

“Why?”

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t feel too good.”

“Do you want something?”

“Can I have a drink of water?”

I stood and went to the bathroom at the end of the hall. But there was nothing to pour the water in. I went back out to the hall and stepped around Pop toward the stairs to the kitchen.

“Wait,” he said. “Don’t leave me.”

“I’m just going to get a glass.”

“For the water?”

“Yeah.”

“No. Stay here.”

“I’ll be right back.”

“I need you to stay here.”

“Okay.” I had an idea. “Hold on,” I said, and headed back past him and down the hall to the bathroom. I turned the faucet on and cupped the palms of my hands under the stream. I brought a handful of water back and knelt down next to him. He opened his mouth without opening his eye.

“More,” he said.

I went back to the bathroom for more water. At the sink I turned and looked out the window. I was looking for a sign that the rest of the world was still out there. And I saw nothing. All I saw was a wall of white mist. A cloud had descended on the house. Or the house had floated up inside a cloud.

When I returned Pop seemed asleep again. His mouth was closed. I poured the handful of water over his head like a blessing.

His eye opened and closed again.

“You’re still here,” he said.

“You feel any better?”

“No.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s my head,” he said.

“Does it hurt?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“I need to lie down,” he said.

“You are lying down.”

“In a *bed*,” he said.

“You want me to get you blankets?”

“I want you to bring me to the bed.”

Down the hall was the door to the bedroom. I looked at the door and back at Pop.

“Can you stand up?”

“Carry me.”

“I can’t.”

“You can drag me.”

“You can’t stand up?”

“Can’t you just drag me?”

“What the hell is wrong with you, Pop?”

He let out a long sigh. “Just do what I told you.”

I went to the bedroom. In the windows was the same wall of white mist I had seen in the bathroom. All over the floor were the cases of DVDs that Eliot had cast aside the night before. I moved them out of the way—into the box and back in the closet—and then I set the bed up, drawing back the blankets and placing the laptop on the shelf next to the Beginner books and the eyeball. I did all this with a serenity of purpose that felt real. Then I went back to the hall where Pop lay still on his back with his legs straight and the palm of his hand over his eye.

I asked him if he was ready. He sort of grunted. I leaned down and smoothed the back of his bathrobe out on the floor as flat as I could before I took hold of his ankles. I lifted his legs up—and he lifted them too. He could move. And he was a lot lighter than I expected when I began to drag him toward the room. I pulled his legs and he glided on the back of his bathrobe grinning as if it were a carnival ride.

I got him to the mattress and he rolled onto it and I lifted the blankets over him.

In the room it was hot. I turned the heat off and opened the lower half of the window to let the air inside and leaned my head all the way outside to see the fog. I couldn't see anything else. Not even my own hand when I stretched it out in front of me. Just mist. Down below was a sound that sounded like waves lapping against the side of the house.

"Outside of here it's death," said Pop.

He turned over on his side facing the wall. I sat down on the floor watching him.

I was watching his phantom mask. In the light I could see how thin and cheap it was—just a flat sheet of plastic covering the left half of his face. I could imagine what he looked like without it. All I had to do was double the other side.

But I began to wonder what was under it. I sensed it was something other than his face.

"Pop," I said.

"Yes. I'm right here."

"Why do you wear that mask?"

"That's a good question," he said. As if that were a good answer.

"Why don't you take the mask off?"

"You don't want me to."

"I do."

He turned over on his other side. "I have a condition," he said.

"Okay. What kind of condition?"

"I have something in my head."

"You mean...the tumor?"

"No."

"No tumor?"

"That's just a mask."

"The tumor is a mask?"

"The mask is a metaphor."

"For what?"

“A face,” he said.

“I don’t understand.”

“A face is a mask,” he said.

“Then what do you have in your head?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“I do.”

“You think you do.”

“Just tell me what it is.”

There was a long deliberate silence. He opened his eye and lifted his head slowly from the pillow to look at me. His eye was on me for a moment. Then he lowered his head back down.

“I have an Omega,” he said.

“A what?”

“An Omega.”

“You have an Omega?”

“I have an Omega. In my head.”

“You have an Omega in your head,” I said.

“In my brain,” he said. “Back in the back somewhere.”

He was starting to fall back asleep again.

“What’s an Omega?”

He said, “What?”

“What is it?”

“An Omega.”

“But what’s an Omega?”

“You don’t know what an Omega is?”

In an abstracted way I knew what the word meant: the last letter in the Greek alphabet—the end of the series. But I didn’t understand what it meant to have an Omega in your head.

“No,” I said. “What is it?”

“It’s sort of a point.”

“A point?”

“Sort of.”

“What kind of point?”

“A point that contains all points,” he said. His eye was open and out of focus. “A place where all the places are. I can see it when I close my eyes: All the points in the universe. I see it all at the same time—from all different angles. It’s inside me. And I’m inside it. And that’s just...how it is.”

In his voice I no longer heard a trace of condescension. He was talking as if he were finally leveling with me. I still had no idea what he was talking about. But I knew he was telling some kind of truth. And I wanted to know what kind.

I said, “So it’s like a small universe?”

“Like an *enormous* universe.”

“How enormous?”

“Endless.”

“An endless universe,” I said.

“But I can see the edge.”

“You can see the edge of the universe?”

“That’s how I know where the center is.”

“Where’s the center?”

“Everywhere.”

“Okay.”

“And the edge is nowhere.”

“But you can see it?”

“If I look for it.”

“Can you see it now?”

His eye was already lightly closed. He closed it harder. Behind his eyelid he seemed to squint. His entire face tensed and stiffened as if he were concentrating all his energy on the struggle to hold the vision in his mind without going blind.

“Okay,” he said. “I see it.”

“What does it look like?”

“Nothing,” he said.

“Nothing?”

“No.”

“It has to look like something.”

“Nothing I can say.” His voice seemed to come from another person behind his face.

“What color is it?”

“*Color?*”

“Is it dark or light?”

“No,” he said. “It’s not any color.”

His face slackened back open as if he were letting go of something heavy.

He breathed and breathed on his back. If I didn’t keep talking to him he might die. And if he died I might never understand what the Omega was. So I tried to think what to ask him.

“What shape is it?”

“The omega?”

“Does it have a shape?”

“Sort of,” he said.

“Like a circle?”

“More like a wheel.”

“Like a spinning wheel?”

“Like a wheel inside a wheel.”

“And both wheels are spinning?”

He started to speak—and stopped to think. He closed his eye to look for the vision, but I saw no sign of tension in his face this time.

“One’s spinning one way,” he said. “And the other—I can’t tell.”

“But they’re spinning in different directions?”

“Well,” he said, as if talking in his sleep.

“Well what?”

“It might be *I’m* the one spinning.”

He was starting to sound distant and disinterested. Like it was all gone now and nothing mattered all that much anyway. But it mattered to me. I wanted to see it—even if it was nothing.

“How big is the wheel?”

“Too big to see.”

“How big?”

“The inside wheel—or the outside one?”

“Outside,” I said. “The bigger one.”

“Well, the inside wheel is bigger.”

“The *inside* wheel is bigger?”

“Sort of.”

“How?”

His arms were at his sides. He lifted his left hand and held his index finger in front of his face. In the air he traced a clockwise circle and stopped, holding his finger aloft for a time. And then he traced a counterclockwise circle, as if erasing the first.

“The outside wheel is inside the inside one.”

“How is that possible?”

“Inside out,” he said.

“But...”

“You sort of have to see it,” he said with a faraway smile. He seemed to take a vaguely possessive pride in the impossibility of properly communicating his vision. It was *his* Omega.

And I wanted it. I wanted to see what he saw. So I closed my eyes. In the space behind them I tried to make a mental picture of the vision. But I couldn’t. Instead of a picture I seemed to see the words that Pop had used to describe it: a point that

contains all points. A place where all the places were. A sort of circle. An infinite wheel (with finite boundaries) spinning inside a finite wheel (without boundaries) that was somehow both bigger and smaller than the wheel inside it. Neither in front of me nor behind me nor to one side or the other, but every place at the same time. In and out of time—and without color. Spinning still.

I opened my eyes.

I was back in the bedroom. Pop sitting propped up on his elbows in the bed watching me with a sort of incredulously complicit grin, as though he had seen me doing something that we both knew was against the rules—attempting to imagine the Omega—but he wasn't going to tell on me, because he had broken the same rule.

In a conspiratorial whisper, he said, "Do you want me to show it to you?"

"Show what to me?"

"The Omega."

"How?"

"I just have to take the mask off."

"You just take the mask off—and I'll see it?"

"If I take both of them off," he said.

"Both what?"

"Masks."

"I thought you said—"

"I have another mask on under this one."

"I thought you said the omega was in your brain."

"Everything's in my brain," he said. "Listen. You want to see it or what?"

I must have nodded.

He asked if I was sure.

I answered as if I were. "Yes."

"Because once you see it," he said, searching in silence for the next word.

His eye was on the fog in the window. A pool of mist was spreading through the room, slicking the ceiling and walls with condensation. I was deep inside the cave of a living body.

“Once I see it,” I said, “what happens?”

He hung his head and swallowed. Holding back tears, I could tell. I reached for the back of his hand. Less to comfort him than to keep him focused on the task. If he started crying he might forget the Omega. And I might never get to see it.

“You can’t go back home,” he said.

“All right.”

“You understand?”

“I want to see it,” I said.

“All right,” he said, sitting up straight. “Here we go.” He cast the blankets aside and crossed his legs so that his feet rested on his thighs. He closed his eye. And then patiently, as if each act was a separate and equal step in ritual that he had performed countless times, he inhaled and exhaled (and inhaled and exhaled) and lifted his palm over the mask. A few seconds pause—and he pushed the mask off.

I saw his entire face.

He looked—like pain. Around the sunken crater of skin where his eye had been was a concentric explosion of swollen scars and scabs spreading down like a dark stain from the bottom of his forehead to the top of his mouth. His nose was a smashed lump of flesh with a penny-sized hole in the center.

I felt sad.

And I felt selfish.

And I felt selfish for feeling sad.

I felt I had misunderstood everything.

I had thought everything was all about me. Everything that Pop had done—I had thought that he was doing it to *me*. And he was doing it for a divivable *reason*. He was testing me. Or he was teaching me a lesson. Or he just got a sadistic kick out of torturing me. Or he was acting out an intricately plotted revenge fantasy conceived in

retaliation to some perceived insult I had unknowingly committed against him years ago. Or maybe (probably) he had no idea what he was doing. Probably he was just sick in the head; that was the explanation I kept circling back to. Yet it never satisfied me. Because it never evoked forgiveness. If he didn't know what he was doing, then it seemed to me he wasn't really doing it. There was no one to forgive. And so I kept searching for the *real* reason. Kept waiting for the moment of revelation. I had come here in search of it. And yet in all this searching and waiting I seemed to have forgotten that Pop was an actual living person—that in the face behind the metaphorical mask was a real man who was really suffering. And the stark reality of his suffering was really all the explanation that was required.

I said, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. For what?"

"What happened to you?"

"I did this to myself," he said.

I wanted to ask him *why*. Yet the question seemed... not intrusive so much as naively irrelevant. All he could possibly do in response to it was to start enumerating reasons. And none of the reasons would ever explain the question itself.

He looked down at the floor resting his elbows on his knees and cradling his head in his hands. Then he lifted his head and looked around the room as though trying to remember where he was.

"It got dark all the sudden," he said.

"You want me to turn on a light?"

He nodded. It was no darker than it had been. But I switched the light on and watched him from the wall. He was hanging his head again—looking at the bed like he might throw up. I picked up the trash bin and sat back down next to him. He lifted his head and looked down into the trash bin.

He said, "Where's the light?"

"I turned it on."

"Where is it?"

“Up there.” I pointed at the light fixture hanging from the ceiling. It had been there—in one form or another—since I was a kid. Yet Pop was looking as though he had never seen anything like it. In his face was an expression of spellbound wonder.

“How’d the light get up *there*?”

“It was always there.”

“In the light?”

“What?”

“How did the light get in the *light*?”

“How did the *light* get in the light?”

“Yeah,” he said, looking up.

“In *that* light?”

“Yeah! Where’d the light *come* from?”

At last I understood he was talking not about the light bulb, but the light itself.

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “Electricity?”

“*Electricity*?” In his voice the word sounded even more absurd than it had sounded when I said it. What the hell *was* electricity?

“I don’t know how that stuff works, Pop.”

He was eying the light fixture as though it were a bat that might swoop down and attack. “Turn it off,” he said, pointing at it.

I went and flicked the switch, watching him watching the light. His arm was still aloft. An instant after the light darkened he nodded approvingly and turned his hand over—palm up. Lifting his arm, he said, “Now turn it on.” I turned the light on. Another nod. He lifted his arm like a sorcerer casting a spell, and said, “Off.” I did what he said. *Off* and I flicked the switch down. *On* and I flicked the switch up. On and off and up and down—a few beats of considerate pause between each. Every time the light re-appeared he beamed and laughed like a kid playing peak-a-boo. I started laughing along with him. It was fun.

And then it wasn’t. He was hanging his head again as though falling asleep. I left the light on and sat back on the floor next to him.

He looked up at the light again. A look of glazed resignation in his eye. I asked if he was all right. No answer. I asked again.

He said, "I'm scared."

"Of what?"

"Dying."

"You're all right."

"No, I'm not. I'm scared."

"But you're not going to die."

"That's not what I'm scared of."

"All right. What are you scared of?"

"I don't know what's going to happen."

"You mean—after you die?"

"After I take it off." He swept his hand across his face as though lifting a veil.

"Your mask?"

"I don't know what's going to happen."

"But...you already took your mask off, Pop."

"I took *that* one off." He slid a glance at the phantom mask on the bed—and then pointed up at his chin. "This is a mask too."

I had forgotten: he said he had two masks on. But that was another metaphor—it had to have been. Because the mutilated face I was looking at now was undeniably made of flesh and blood.

"Omega's under *this* mask," he said. "Back in the back somewhere—*behind* the face. And I'm going to show it to you. But first I need you to make me a promise. Can you make me a promise?"

I was ready to do anything he asked. "Whatever you need, Pop."

"Because I can't do it," he said.

"What is it?"

"I need you to spread the word."

He looked at me. He seemed to assume I would know what he meant.

“You need me to spread...*what* word?”

“You need to write it down.”

“Write *what* down?”

“Everything.”

“Everything?”

“Everything you saw.”

“You mean—like a story?”

“Like the truth,” he shrugged. “That’s all. No games. This isn’t art. This is real life. Just write down what really happened. What you saw. What I said. Spread the word. So people can see it.”

“Why?”

“So people can see it.”

“So people can see the Omega?”

“Through the mind’s eye,” he nodded.

“But why do you want people to see it?”

“Because no one else knows about it,” he said. “No one else knows what the hell I am. No one’s ever even seen the Omega before. Just me. And I’ve only ever seen it from *inside*. You know what that means? That means you’re going to be the *first* person to ever see it from *outside*. That’s a big deal, man. Bigger than you and me. See, you and me—we’re like prophets. Messengers of the Omega. I give the message to you. You’ve got to give it to the world.” He stared at me as though to make sure I understood the scope of my task. I must have looked like I did because after a moment he smiled and slapped at the pillow with his palm. “You’re the *writer!*” he shouted, as though he were congratulating me. And all the sudden he seemed like a madman again. I felt like a fool for almost believing him.

I nodded. “Okay.”

“You promise?”

“Sure, Pop.”

“All right,” he said. “This is the end right here. And you only get one look. You blink you’re blind. So keep your eyes open. No matter what happens—keep your eyes on me. That’s the only way you’re going to see. You understand?”

I was almost uncertain I was not possibly dreaming. Yet the certainty—the absence of it—did not diminish the desire to know. Something was going to happen even if nothing did.

I told him I understood.

He looked at me like I was a mirror. In his eye was a glint of pride.

Then he sat back straight. His legs were crossed. His elbows were on his knees. He leaned forward and cupped his palms against his ears taking a deep breath and leaning back so that he was looking up at the light fixture hanging down from the ceiling. “Here goes nothing,” he said with a slanted smile, and then his eye closed. His face took on a contorted expression of tortured attention: he was looking at the Omega. Looking deep inside. Another surrendering breath—and he began to pull his head. His hands were pulling up and out as though his head were some kind of space helmet that was stuck on top of his neck. It wasn’t coming off. He kept pulling. It was stuck. A sort of groaning was coming from him. His face looked like an enormously gorged blister that was about to pop. And then it popped.

I heard a sharply ripping sound.

His head burst open and disappeared inside out like a mouth swallowing itself.

There was an explosion of creational light of almost unbearable brightness.

I shut my eyes—then opened them.

It was then that I saw the Omega.

And now I reach the point in my story where words stop working. Every word is a symbol. Every symbol refers to something that really exists—or really could exist—in the mind. Every sentence I have written so far is an effort to make you see in your mind what I saw in mine. To read is to remember—and to remember is to make a mental picture composed of pre-existing images and ideas. But how can you make a mental picture of something that *is not anything*? How can I describe something that

cannot exist in the created world? To describe what I saw is to lie. At best I can say what I did not see. Because the absolute truth is that I did not see anything at all.

What I saw when Pop took his mask off was Nothing. Not darkness. Not an empty space. Not an endless void. Not a spinning wheel or a black hole or an overflowing point of light. Just...Nothing. This Nothing was infinite and indivisible and infinitely divisible. Inside and outside of it there was no space and no time. No color or shape or mass. No measurable size or surface area. It was not moving. Nor was it still. It was neither living nor dead. It did not begin at one spatial point and end at another. It was everywhere. Yet it was also nowhere. It was invisible. Yet I saw it through my eyes. At the same time I saw (through my eyes) everything else that was happening in the space outside me.

I saw that Pop was dead. I saw his body (without his face) fallen in a crumpled heap on the bed, saw the mask of his face (without his body) at rest on the floor, saw the eye in his face looking up at me, saw the blood pooled under his head, saw each drop of blood on the wall, saw each particle of mist in the air, saw the light in the light, saw (as though I were re-living them) the straight line of causes and effects that had led me to this moment, saw that this line was infinite, saw the infinite line bending into a finite circle, saw that the circle was composed of written words, saw the words that I was thinking, saw the words that you are reading, saw everything as Pop wanted me to: an indivisible mass of symbols blanketing reality in a veil of visible existence.

I saw this veil. I saw that the world *was* this veil. And at the same time I saw beneath the veil to the grace that God must have seen when his eye adjusted to the light of creation: everything was one. Everything was part of everything else. All the outlines separating one thing from the other dissolved before my eyes, revealing a softly undulating mass of undifferentiated *stuff* that seemed absurdly and beautifully superfluous—a vomitous excess of existence. Nothing had to be here. Yet there it was. And that was good.

I saw all this in a single instant. In that same instant it began to dissipate.

I was back in the room. That was where I was. I was in the room and Pop was still dead. It was getting dark inside out.

I knew what I had to do. I went down the stairs to the kitchen telephone. I picked up the phone and called for help. I heard a ringing sound. It rang three times. And then a voice that sounded like mine was speaking from the other end of the line. I told the voice who I was and where. I asked for help. It was promised. I was told it might take some time because I was so far away. That was all right. I thanked the voice and hung up the phone. I went back upstairs to wait. In the window the mist was fading. I was starting to see the outlines of the outer world again. It was all there. And I was going to have to go back to it. Go back down the mountain and explain everything in words from the beginning to the end. So people could see it.

I was still waiting.

I waited for a long time.

At some point I heard a sound from outside. I went down the steps and opened the door to see if someone was there.

But there was no one.

I stepped outside and saw no one. Then I went back inside and wrote: *You already know who I am. And I am still the same person.*

But you did not know who I was. And I was not the same person.

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